

## Chinese children's family tourism experiences

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Family tourism  
Tourism experiences  
Chinese children  
Photo-elicitation interviews

### ABSTRACT

The role of children in family tourism has been recognized increasingly. However, their travel experiences are under-researched. This is the first study that focuses on children's views of family tourism in the world's most populous country, China. It explores Chinese children's views of family tourism experiences. More than one hundred (139) children aged 8–11 from three schools in a coastal Chinese city participated in the research by drawing pictures and sharing stories with the researchers. The results suggest that Chinese children, at least in these schools, have extensive travel experiences and a clear idea of what constitutes a memorable family tourism experience. Such experiences usually occur with their nuclear family, and are centered upon family togetherness and physical activities. Animal encounters, tasting local food, and appreciation of natural and built environments also matter. As future tourists, their views offer implications for destinations interested in attracting more Chinese tourists.

### 1. Introduction

Family tourism, due to its consumptive nature, as well as the purported benefits to family functioning, has attracted substantial industry attention and increasing academic interest (Cicero & Osti, 2018; Durko & Petrick, 2013; Lehto, Choi, Lin, & MacDermid, 2009; Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009). Recently, the increasing size of the family market in emerging economies, such as China, has been noticed. In TripAdvisor's (2015) global survey of 34,026 consumers from 32 countries, it was reported that 61% of the Chinese participants were prepared to spend more in 2016 to reward themselves or their families. Compared with other form of tourism, a distinctive feature of family tourism is the involvement of children, who often exert an active social role in shaping the nature of holiday experiences (Carr, 2011; Hay, 2017; Schänzel & Carr, 2016).

A comprehensive review of family tourism research suggests that most studies of family holidays have been conducted in western contexts. However, there are considerable differences between western and Asian tourists (Huang, 2017; Khoo-Lattimore & Yang, 2018; Reisinger & Turner, 2002). For example, Lehto, Fu, Li and Zhou (2017) suggested that Chinese families deliberately seek informal educational platforms for their children. They consider vacations as a holistic learning experience for children. Khoo-Lattimore and Yang's (2018) reported similar findings in their study of Chinese decedents in Malaysia. In addition to the potential differences, the increasingly important roles of

the Chinese market in the world tourism should not be ignored (Li, 2016b; Pearce & Wu, 2016). As a result, studies of Chinese family tourism would be helpful to both the academic community and the tourism industry. In the Chinese context, due to the influence of the one-child policy, especially in urban areas, as well as the traditional emphasis on child rearing, children exert a greater influence on family activities and consumption, including leisure activities and tourism (Wu & Wall, 2016). As a result, when studying Chinese family tourism, children's roles should not be overlooked. Globally, researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the active roles of children in tourism (Canosa, Moyle, & Wray, 2016; Feng & Li, 2016; Hay, 2018; Schänzel & Carr, 2016; Schänzel, Yeoman, & Backer, 2012). In the past decade, some scholars have explored the voices of children in family holidays (Gram, Therkelsen, & Larsen, 2018; Hay, 2017; Rhoden, Hunter-Jones, & Miller, 2016). Accordingly, this study acknowledges the active role of children in influencing family tourism decisions. It advances family holiday research through exploration of Chinese children's perceptions of memorable family tourism. The empirical materials for this study were collected in Hangzhou, in eastern China, which is one of the most prosperous cities in China.

### 2. Literature review

In order to provide a context for the empirical research, family tourism and the role of children in this phenomenon will be discussed,

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followed by a consideration of some of the methodological implications of using children as informants.

### 2.1. Children and family tourism

The tourism industry has taken a proactive approach to the child-oriented tourism market, realizing the value of children's travel needs and desires, as well as the fact that they are usually accompanied by adults. For example, many child-oriented venues (e.g. theme parks, themed accommodation, shopping malls, and cinemas), have been designed to promote and profit from cheerful family tourism experiences (Carr, 2011; Schänzel et al., 2012). In contrast, academics have generally been slower to address the topic, although some research on children as tourists is emerging (Allan, 2014). Recently, Feng and Li (2016) conducted a systematic review of children in tourism. They identified 50 articles published in English and Mandarin from 1979 to 2016. The majority of the works consider children as passive disadvantaged groups. The topics studied include children's roles in family tourism decision making, children's tourism experiences and the outcomes of travel for children. Children's active roles in family tourism decision making and travel patterns both before and during the trip are the most researched topics among the three (Blichfeldt, Pedersen, Johansen, & Hansen, 2011; Bronner & de Hoog, 2008; Curtale, 2018; Gram, 2007; Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, & Cheah, 2015; Thornton, Shaw, & Williams, 1997; Wang, Hsieh, Yeh, & Tsai, 2004).

Though leisure researchers have explored children's experiences in exhibitions, galleries, museums and zoos (Falk, 1991; Therkelsen & Lottrup, 2014), research on children's travel experiences is remarkably limited (Kerr & Price, 2015; Poria & Timothy, 2014). A careful examination undertaken with the use of Google scholar only revealed a small number of empirical studies. Cullingford (1995), in one of his broad studies of children's views, examined British children's attitudes to travel, and their perceptions and experiences of different holiday destinations. He revealed some significant expectations of holidays, as well as some disappointments, including the importance of the accommodation arrangements, and early indications of the development of a mental framework that divides the world clearly into what is attractive and what is not. Gram (2005) interviewed 26 German and Danish family groups, and explored the successful moments in family holidays from the perspective of parents and children. She found that, "the good moments are perceived to be moments where all family members are content and happy, with no nagging or sulking, and in situations where the children are absorbed by activities, not necessarily with their parents" (P.2). Small (2008) assessed the memories of childhood holidays of Australian women and girls and found that shared, fun, physical activities are common positive memories of childhood holidays across generations. Also, Hilbrecht, Shaw, Delamere, and Havitz's (2008) study in Canada revealed three main themes in children's narratives about family tourism: a focus on having fun as an important vacation outcome; a balance between newness and familiarity; and the centrality of social connections to reaffirm and strengthen relationships with family and friends. Schänzel and Smith (2011a) adopted an holistic approach to encompass all of the family members' voices on family holidays. For children, they used an auto-driven photo-elicitation technique to gather information. In recent years, a few new studies have emerged. For example, Kerr and Price (2015) identified the reasons behind the scarcity of studies on children's visits to dark sites and suggested directions for future research. Rhoden et al. (2016), using diaries, assessed 39 British children's views of summer holidays. They found that for children, as for others, holidays offer an escape from everyday routines. Accommodation, beaches, swimming pools, water slides, parks, animal sanctuaries (zoos, farms and safari parks), sports facilities (football and bike hire), weather conditions, natural scenery and views are children's favorite holiday recollections. Hay (2017, 2018) interviewed 26 Australian children in hotels and explored their perceptions of family holidays. In particular,

he examined children's observations on the provision of food in hotels. In the Asian context, Khoo-Lattimore and her colleagues assessed Malaysian Chinese young children's (aged 5 and 6) favorite destinations and representation of fun holiday activities (Khoo-Lattimore & Yang, 2018). They revealed the collectivistic Confucian values of family and education, which distinguish them from western family holidays.

A review of children and family tourism research suggests at least two research opportunities. Firstly, it is evident that children's voices have been under-valued by researchers as they either approached children as passive actors (Obrador, 2012) or only assessed their parents' or other stakeholders' perspectives (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2015; Khoo-Lattimore, delChiappa, & Yang, 2018; Wang et al., 2004; Wu & Wall, 2017). It is important to acknowledge that children and parents may have different, even contrasting, views regarding their family tourism experiences (Fu, Lehto, & Park, 2014; Gram, 2005; Shaw & Dawson, 2001; Therkelsen & Lottrup, 2014). As a result, it is timely to give a more prominent voice to children in order to better understand their views (Blichfeldt et al., 2011; Durko & Petrick, 2013; Hay, 2018; Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015).

Secondly, from a geographical perspective, most children and family tourism research has been undertaken in mature markets, e.g. Europe (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2018; Poria, Atzaba-Poria, & Barrett, 2005; Rhoden et al., 2016), North America (Fu et al., 2014; Hilbrecht et al., 2008), and Oceania (Hay, 2017, 2018; Schänzel & Smith, 2011b; Small, 2008). In the contemporary tourism market, it is acknowledged that changes have been occurring in the origins of tourists and that there has been a dramatic growth in the number of tourists from non-western countries (Li, 2016b). However, for economic, social and cultural reasons, the emerging markets may have some distinctive behavioral characteristics in comparison with their western counterparts Li, 2016a; Pearce & Wu, 2016; Reisinger & Turner, 2002. Thus, for family tourism research, it is helpful to carry out investigations in non-western contexts in order to better understand the complexity and diversity of family tourism (Khoo-Lattimore & Yang, 2018; Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015).

### 2.2. Methodological issues associated with research on children and tourism

One can speculate upon the reason for the lack of research into children and family tourism. The research gap is unlikely to have resulted from the perceived lack of importance of children. Rather it may reflect, in part, the challenges of eliciting information from young children as research subjects (Hay, 2018). In many countries, there are legal hurdles and academic risks to undertaking research with children (Kerr & Price, 2015; Schänzel & Smith, 2011a). There are a number of ethical dilemmas of doing research with children (Morrow, 2008). It takes time and effort to gain ethics approval from government agencies and the university or the research institute in which the researcher is based (Carr, 2011). In addition, permission from their guardians is not always easy to gain. Further, it is necessary to have special knowledge of human development and the selection of appropriate research methods to interact with children (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). For example, the commonly used scale-based questionnaire survey may not be appropriate for use with young children. Researchers may need to acquire special expertise, for example, being familiar with data acquisition techniques (e.g. storytelling, and pictorial questions) and procedures that can be used to investigating children at various developmental stages (Poria & Timothy, 2014).

A few scholars have emphasized the importance of listening to children's voices and the weakness of relying only on adult representations of children's experiences and opinions (Schänzel & Smith, 2011a; Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015). Some have offered good suggestions to overcome the methodological challenges to gain emic voices from children. For example, Khoo-Lattimore (2015) discussed methodological issues in conducting research with children, particularly consideration of developmental phase, the use of appropriate props and

prompts during data collection, and the positionality and pre-requisites of the researcher. Two challenges are particularly relevant to this research:

- 1) Children can behave differently in the presence of their parents or other guardians when compared with when their parents or guardians are absent (Gram, 2005; Handel, Cahill, & Elkin, 2006). It is thus, if possible, desirable to listen to children's voices without their parents' or other adults' interruption.
- 2) It is critical to take into consideration children's cognitive and psychological development stage, age and other demographic differences, and to use a data acquisition method that is appropriate. Older children, such as teenagers, are able to participate in interviews and complete questionnaire surveys. These traditional approaches may not work for young children. Visual materials, especially drawings or photos created or taken by children themselves, have great power in enabling children to share information, and discussion of drawings can elicit additional information and aid in their interpretation (Schänzel & Smith, 2011a). Children, especially young children, can use drawings or photos as a way to articulate their knowledge of the world that they experience or have heard about through various media (Gamradt, 1995; Kerr & Price, 2015).

### 2.3. Synthesis

The scarcity of research on children's memorable family tourism experiences, particularly non-western children's family travel experiences, calls for more academic efforts in this area. Given the rising importance of Asia in the contemporary tourism world, this study focuses on the Chinese market and explores family tourism experiences from the perspectives of children. It uses photo-elicitation interviews and examines the visual representations of Chinese children's views of family tourism experiences.

## 3. Research methods

### 3.1. Research design

Considering the specific challenges of doing research with children, this study adopted a modified form of photo-elicitation interviews as the key research method. Photo-elicitation interviews incorporate visual materials, including photos, drawings, videos or other forms of visual stimuli (Collier & Collier, 1986). During an interview, photos or other visual materials such as drawings, rather than a question, are used to stimulate responses from research participants, and they are the foci of the discussion (Loeffler, 2004). With visual materials to stimulate the interviews, the participants work collaboratively with the researcher in a relatively equal and natural situation to portray, describe, or analyze a social phenomenon. In research with children or other disadvantaged groups (e.g. the elderly and indigenous people), such a procedure may help to overcome communication and cultural barriers (Khoo-Lattimore, 2015; Schänzel & Smith, 2011a). In this study, the children are empowered to create and interpret their own drawings.

The term "children" is broad and may cover all those from toddlers to teenagers. In this study, children in Year 3–6 in primary schools, aged 8–11, were selected. Different from toddlers, they are at an age when they begin to enact and understand social interactions, and can communicate independently with others. They differ from teenagers, some of whom may strive to be individuals in their own right and detach themselves from their parents (Blichfeldt et al., 2011).

### 3.2. Data collection

Research was undertaken in Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang Province in east China. It has a population of over nine million and a relatively well-developed economy (per capital GDP of 18,106 USD in

2016). Hangzhou is usually positioned in the first tier of tourist source regions in China by both domestic and overseas destination management organizations (DMOs). Citizens, generally, have had travel experience and, thus, it is a suitable place in which to conduct the current research.

Data were gathered from primary schools in Hangzhou, a source commonly used by other researchers (e.g. Khoo-Lattimore, 2015). Schools are convenient venues at which to access a number of children efficiently. They are also places where parental influences on the elicitation process can be minimized. The authors used their long established links with local schools and selected three primary schools with different features. The first school is a large public school with a high academic reputation. Due to the strict school district system in China, only families with superior economic background can afford apartments close to that school. As a result, the students in this public school are mostly from families of well-to-do backgrounds. The second school is an average medium sized public school, with most students from middle class families living close by. The third school is a medium sized public school located in a less developed community. Students in this school tend to be from less affluent families, some of which were new migrants. In other words, an effort was made to engage children from diverse family backgrounds.

Data were collected in September and October 2016, when memory of a family vacation was likely still to be fresh because participants had just returned to school from their summer holiday (in July or August) or the National holiday (October 1st), which are popular family holiday seasons for Chinese families with young children. The principals of the three schools were contacted, the research aims and procedures were described and official support was gained at the end of August, before the students' returned to school. One class from each grade (Year 3–6) was randomly selected and the head teachers of the selected classes were asked to invite 8–12 students to participate in the research. The class teacher emphasized at the selection stage that participation was voluntary and they informed the participating students of the research questions. The research was also introduced to the parents through the class social media group. If any of the students' guardians felt unhappy for their children to participate in the research, then their children would not be involved. None of the parents were against their children's participation because they are supportive of most activities proposed by the school teachers. Collecting the data from schools avoids parents' influences and is also efficient. However, there is a risk that the school teachers may select the more articulate children. This is a limitation of the sampling approach.

The Chinese speaking research team members visited each school four times, either during the mid-day break (12:00–13:30) or during the afternoon activity time (2:00–3:30), depending on the availability of the students. On each occasion, 8 to 12 students were gathered together in a science or art classroom with the class teachers' assistance. Following the class teacher's introduction, the principal researcher informed the children of the activities that they would participate in, i.e., they would draw a picture about a memorable or unforgettable moment from their family travel experiences. Drawing materials (i.e., A4 sized papers, colored pencils, crayons, erasers, and rulers) were provided. They were told to draw from memory and that their drawing skills would not be judged. No ethics application was needed in the current Chinese research context, so neither information sheets nor consent forms were given to the children or their parents. During the interviews, the children were again informed that participation was voluntary and that they could stop if they felt uncomfortable.

Once a student had finished their drawing, they were directed to approach one of the four researchers in the same classroom, to have a short discussion about their images. In the interview session, children were asked to interpret the image they drew, to share stories about the moment, their travel experience, and to provide their basic demographic background. The interviews usually lasted 10–20 min, depending on the richness of the travel experience the children were

**Table 1**  
Profile of the children participating in the research (N = 134).

Attributes	No.(Percent)
Gender	Male 67(50%) Female 67(50%)
Origins of the schools	School 1 46(34.3%) School 2 46(34.3%) School 3 42(31.4%)
Grade	Year 3 (aged 8) 42(31.3%) Year 4 (aged 9) 29(21.6%) Year 5 (aged 10) 29(21.6%) Year 6 (aged 11) 34(25.4%)
Travel companion	A core family 106(79.1%) An extended family 8(5.97%) 2–3 core families 28(20.9%) Other adults (e.g. grandparents, uncles, aunts) 5(3.74%)
Travel frequencies (per year)	Once 13(9.7%) 2–3 times 45(33.6%) 4–5 times 45(33.6%) 6 times or more 31(23.16%)
Travel time	Winter/summer holidays 71(53.0%) Winter/summer holidays + golden weeks <sup>a</sup> 34(25.4%) Winter/summer holidays + golden weeks + weekends 29(21.6%)
Domestic travel experiences	1–3cities 50(37.3%) 4–5 cities 36(26.9%) 6–10cities 34(25.4%) 11or more cities 14(10.5%)
International travel experience (by number)	None 43(32.8%) 1–2 countries or regions 44(33.1%) 3–5 countries or regions 36(26.9%) 6 or more countries or regions 11(8.2%)
International travel experience (by distance)	None 43(32.1%) Short-distance (within Asia) 50(37.3%) Long-distance (out of Asia) 28(20.9%) Mixed 13(9.7%)

<sup>a</sup> The golden weeks in China are the seven days public holidays surrounding the National Day (1st Oct) and Chinese Spring Festival (usually late January or early February).

willing to share. All the interviews were tape-recorded with both the school's and the children's permission. Field notes were also taken during the interviews. On completing the interview, a small “thank you” gift, a set of bookmarks, was given to each participant. In all, 139 drawings about family tourism experiences were collected. Five of them were considered as invalid, as they were either about tours organized

**Table 2**  
Elements shaping children's family tourism experiences.

Element 1: Family togetherness (N = 134)			
Being together with parents or other adults	32.8% <sup>a</sup>	Being together with siblings/cousins/close friends	10.1%
Element 2: Physical activities			
Beach based (e.g. sand castles, swimming, diving, & snorkeling)	24.6%	Climbing and hiking	19.4%
Theme parks and rides	15.6%	Boating & fishing (river/lake based)	11.2%
Other activities (e.g. skiing, football)	8.2%		
Element 3: Encounters with animals			
Wildlife in the nature	20.9%	Encounters with animals	7.5%
Animals in zoos	3.0%		
Element 4: Local food and snacks			
Local cuisines	20.1%	Desserts (e.g. ice cream)	3.6%
Local fruit	6.5%		
Element 5: Natural landscapes			
Mountains/hills/trees	14.9%	Rivers/lakes/creeks/water falls	12.7%
Rural areas	6.8%	Others (e.g. grasslands)	6.0%
Element 6: Built environment			
Modern buildings	14.9%	Historical architecture	14.9%
Accommodations	9.7%		
Element 7: Others			
Transportation (Flights, cruises, trains, helicopters, & cable cars)	19.4%	Social contacts (with local people, other tourists, & with peers)	8.2%
Others			

<sup>a</sup> The numbers in the columns represent the percentage of the 134 informants who visually recorded and/or mentioned an attribute.

by the school, or leisure activities in the city in which they live. As a result, 134 primary students' drawings and interviews were used in the study. Table 1 provides the profiles of the research participants. Cross-tabulation analyses with chi-square tests were conducted to examine whether or not children with different demographic backgrounds have significantly different travel experiences. It was found that children from the most prestigious public school have had significantly more international travel experiences. They had visited more countries (with  $\chi^2 = 18.65$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), and they had more long distance travel experience, for example, out of Asia (with  $\chi^2 = 14.88$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ). This finding also justifies the selection of three schools located in different suburbs with slightly different social economic backgrounds since it ensured greater diversity of experiences.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Analysis of the 134 drawings and interviews represented a great interpretive challenge. In this study, the analysis focused on the ways in which the children depicted their family tourism experiences, rather than on the aesthetics of the drawings. The individual children's drawings and their follow-up interviews were used as the principal unit of analysis. The drawing-elicited interviews were as helpful for the data analysis as the drawings themselves. Together with the drawings, the tape-recorded interviews were first transcribed for content analysis. Content analysis was selected because it offers the opportunity for the quantification of data, that is, measuring the frequency of different categories and themes (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). A coding scheme was developed through multiple rounds of discussion among the researchers, with reference to previous research on children's tourism experiences. The content analyses and the assessment of the coding scheme in this study were undertaken in three ways following Pearce, Wu, and Chen's (2015) recommendations for analyzing visual materials.

First, two of the native speaking research members spent some time assessing 30 drawings and the following-up interviews, with 10 from each school. They then conferred and identified the attributes that Chinese children give to memorable family tourism experiences. Through negotiation and seeking advice from other team member, 23 specific attributes were identified under seven themes. Next, core elements of the images and interviews were recorded in numerical form (presence or absence) allowing the percentages of participants coded into the chosen themes to be presented (see Table 2 for themes). Additionally, a distributional analysis to explore the content of family

tourism experiences was undertaken. Finally, selected drawings and interviews were chosen to illustrate major themes for presentation as examples in this paper. Similar data acquisition and analytical procedures have been used by other researchers exploring children's perspectives on a variety of topics, e.g. the work of Woon (2017) on children's views on peace in the Philippines. Ultimately, the coding was conducted independently by two researchers, who were also field investigators, and agreement ranged from 81% to 94%.

#### 4. Results

Almost all (131/134) the children remembered and reported positively on a very happy time spent with their family. Many of them made positive statements such as, "As long as I'm on holiday, I'm happy." The three children who reported negative tourism experiences spoke about being physically sick in an unfamiliar destination, extremely bad weather, and heavy congestion and crowding in the destination. Analysis of the overall representations of children's family tourism experiences indicated six main themes: family togetherness, physical activities, animal encounters, impressions of local food, the natural environment, the built environment, and other memorable elements (Table 2).

##### 4.1. Family togetherness

In previous research focusing on adults' views, it was observed that family tourism is essentially about spending quality time away from home with one's family members (e.g. Schänzel, Smith, & Weaver, 2005). The present study indicates that being together and doing things with one's family are much appreciated by the Chinese children (44/134, Table 2 and Fig. 1). Indeed, many of the physical activities, for example, boating, fishing, taking rides, and taking a hot spring bath, to be mentioned in the next theme, are done together with the family. An 11 year old girl commented, "This image (the left one in Fig. 1) was about time in a Japanese community park. It was in the late afternoon after we visited some tourism attractions. My parents and I wandered in the park. We had some mini activities, for example, appreciating the ancient trees and plants. The one I enjoyed most was chasing my parents. They acted as my friends, very easygoing, communicable and pleasant. It was soooo relaxing, without a homework burden and family teaching. I would like to have more relaxing and care-free time with my parents, who tend to be serious at home."

In addition, fatherhood, which has been emphasized in recent family tourism research (Schänzel & Smith, 2011b; Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015), was highlighted by the Chinese children. The chance to be close with one's dad is much appreciated. For example, a Year 4 girl drew a picture of a mask (the middle one in Fig. 1) and commented, "My dad bought this mask when we traveled in Alaska. It is much more beautiful than the one I drew. It is elegant, with feathers and shining beads.... I like it a lot because it is special, as it was given by my dad. He is very busy and can't

spend much time with me." A boy in year 3, recalling his Beijing tour, observed, "I like to travel with my dad. He is more generous and easygoing. He will always purchase gifts I like."

Further, holidays offer children the chance to have fun together with their siblings and peers (Gram, 2005; Schänzel & Smith, 2014). Fourteen children highlighted this type of togetherness. In the Chinese context, due to the long established one-child policy, most of the urban children do not have siblings to travel with. The presence of cousins and close friends makes experiences more memorable, especially when they are involved together in a variety of activities. For example, a Year 5 boy indicated, "We traveled to Hainan Island in a big family. My most enjoyable time was building castles, racing and running on the beach, and catching crabs with my two cousins. My cousins are cute and playful. We got on well with each other. They made my trip full of fun." Many families choose to travel with other families, most of whom are their siblings, close friends or colleagues (Wu & Wall, 2016). This finding is consistent with the popularity of the group ethic and appreciation of companions in Chinese family tourism.

##### 4.2. Physical activities

Being active is a key characteristic of young children (Kremer et al., 2014). In their recollection of family tourism experiences, physical activities are welcomed (Fig. 2). These are often undertaken in Chinese people's favorite natural landscapes, for example, various water based and mountain environments (Sun, Zhang, & Ryan, 2015). Chinese people have a long tradition of admiring mountains and waters, as suggested in the Confucian statement that "The wise love mountains, the benevolent love water." This kind of appreciation is fostered both in formal school education and informal family learning. Thus, mountain and water related resources are selected by a great number of families. Both beach activities (33/134) and river/lake activities (21/134) are highly welcomed by the children. Memorable activities include building castles, swimming, diving, snorkeling, catching crabs on the beach, fishing with one's family, observing the blue ocean, and enjoying the sunset or sunrise and the breeze (see the left picture in Fig. 2). Also, the enjoyment of climbing and hiking in well-known mountains (e.g. the big four mountains, the four Buddhism mountains, and the Taoist mountains) are recorded by 21/134 children (see the middle picture in Fig. 2). In addition to activities in natural environments, taking exciting and exotic rides in theme parks (27/134) are also highly preferred by the research participants (see the right picture in Fig. 2).

##### 4.3. Encounters with animals

Animals and wildlife form another major attraction (Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011). In this study, an encounter with animals is a common theme, which is highlighted by one fifth of the participants. Encountering butterflies, dragonflies, swans, earthworms, cows, sheep, and various birds, which are rare in one's daily urban life, can make



Fig. 1. Pictures of family togetherness.

Sources: images from interviewees, used with permission.



Fig. 2. Pictures of physical activities.

Sources: images from interviewees, used with permission.



Fig. 3. Drawings of animal encounters.

Sources: images from interviewees, used with permission.

family trips memorable. For example, a Year 4 boy who visited Inner Mongolia with his family recalled, “When I woke up in the morning, I heard some beautiful calls. It was a bird calling. Look, really big and beautiful. Pity I don't know its name, but I remember the nice moment.” (see the left image in Fig. 3). Also, some children had the chance to interact with animals, e.g. feeding a wombat on an Australian farm, and playing with fishes and turtles when diving in the Philippines (see the middle image in Fig. 3). These experiences are considered to be family tourism highlights. Although visiting zoos is a common family activity, very few children (4/134) mention animals in zoos, unless they are rare or distinctive species, such as pandas, koalas, platypus and anteaters.

#### 4.4. Savoring local food and snacks

Food is becoming a special interest attraction in its own right in many destinations as it can provide tourists with various types of sensory and cultural experiences (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Stone, Soulard, Migacz, & Wolf, 2017). Chinese tourists, especially the younger cohort, have been considered to be ‘foodies’, as they are open to new food items and ready to try local cuisine (Pearce & Wu, 2016). The children also showed great interest in food. More than a quarter of them highlight their dining experiences. It is centrally about savoring local cuisines, such as fruit (mostly unfamiliar tropical fruit) and desserts (especially ice cream). Local cuisines are memorable to the children, partly because they are distinctive from their daily meals, for example, sushi in Japan, barbeque in Inner Mongolia, and roasted duck in Beijing. It is also because the local cuisine is connected to stories. For example, in Fig. 4, the girl who drew a sushi set is a devotee of Japanese cartoons and culture. The girl who drew the picture in the middle of Fig. 4 is impressed with the size of the barbeque that she shared with her father. The boy in the right picture is amazed at how the food (roasted duck) is served in one of Beijing's most traditional restaurants, which is decorated in the traditional Beijing style. The formal dining atmosphere, the

dining norms and nutrition concerns, which are raised by western children (Hay, 2017, 2018), are seldom mentioned by our young study participants.

#### 4.5. Natural landscapes

Appreciation of natural environments is identified as being important by our group of urban informants, largely because the environments in which vacations occur differ substantially from those in which they spend most of their day-to-day lives. Many of the memorable activities are undertaken in unaccustomed environments so the two are linked but, in the coding scheme, natural environment is recorded when children emphasize the environment itself, rather than the activities in which they participated. Consistent with Chinese' long established appreciation of mountains and water as mentioned earlier, mountain and water related environments were frequently reported by the children. A typical comment is offered by a Year 4 boy in the first primary school, “We learned many texts and poems depicting the gorgeous natural landscapes of our country.... I have a dream that my parents and I can visit as many famous mountains as possible. We climbed Huangshan this summer holiday (the left picture in Fig. 5). I fully enjoyed the climbing experience, challenging but rewarding.” The environmental contrasts to the children's urban living situation were also highlighted by 17 children, especially the peaceful rural areas and the vast, exotic grasslands. A Year 3 boy said, “My family and I always enjoy visiting my grandparents in Sichuan (west China), because on the grassland I can run as wild as I like and I can also play with the sheep. They are soooo cute.” (see the right image in Fig. 5).

#### 4.6. Built environment

In addition to the natural environments, some informants suggested that aspects of the built environment made their family tour special and

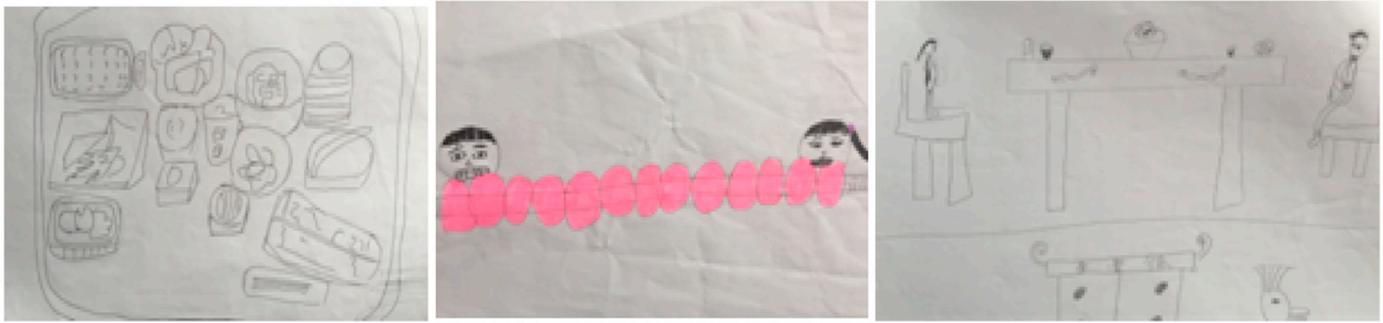


Fig. 4. Pictures of local food and snacks.  
Sources: images from interviewees, used with permission.

memorable. The skyscrapers in New York, Shanghai and other big cities are considered attractive by 20 children. Also, another 20 children identify visiting historical architecture as interesting and meaningful, especially the churches, temples and other cultural heritage sites. Accommodation is mentioned only occasionally (13/134), unless it is unusual and different from most normal hotels in the city. Such examples include the middle and right image in Fig. 6, a unique Thai hotel and a historically presented Chinese hotel in Nanjing. Other occasions include a stay at a “Hello Kitty” themed hotel room, having breakfast surrounded by marine fishes, living in a cabin/yurt/Mongolian camp, and enjoying the ocean view from a swing on a spacious balcony.

#### 4.7. Others

In addition to the six key elements mentioned above, a small number of children also highlighted transportation-related experiences. They (26/134) are impressed with distinctive kinds of transport that they seldom come across in their daily life. These include jets for long-haul flights, high-speed trains, large cruise ships, helicopters and cable cars. For some, it was their first experience of such a vehicle and, as such, the experience is noteworthy. For example, watching movies and playing games on a flight entertainment system, seeing lightening through the windows of a plane, swimming on the top floor of a cruise ship, and overlooking the magnificent Great Barrier Reef from a helicopter are identified as special experiences. In many cases, these transport systems are more than means of getting from place to place but are the platforms on which memorable experiences occur.

Lastly, social contacts with strangers are identified as being memorable by a few children (11/134). Some pointed out differences between the hosts and themselves, the hospitality of local residents, and the professionalism of service providers. However, it seems that Chinese children's social interactions while on holiday are primarily internal to the family. Encounters with other tourists (adults) and

having fun with other children occur from time to time, but are only emphasized by four children. As less prominent themes, in order to save space, drawings that depict transportation and social contacts are not included in this paper.

#### 4.8. Summary of the memorable tourism experiences

In summary, six main themes and two subsidiary themes have been identified that represent factors that contribute to the formation of children's memorable family experiences. A review of the themes suggests that in the children's eyes, family tourism is essentially about being together with one's parents or other adults. During this family time, the natural landscape, especially mountains and water, as well as mountain and water based activities are highly preferred. They are also fun seekers, enjoying various exciting activities, such as taking rides in theme parks. Further, observing wildlife, tasting local food, and appreciating the built environment are also welcomed. Fig. 7 presents the ideas concisely.

### 5. Discussion

Previous studies of family tourism have mostly addressed two themes: family tourism decision making and the functions of family vacations (Fu et al., 2014). There is a lack of research that focuses on the travel experiences of families, especially from the perspectives of children (Hay, 2017; Khoo-Lattimore & Yang, 2018; Poria & Timothy, 2014). This study has shown that, when invited to present their views through the application of appropriate research methods, children are able to articulate the attributes of their memorable tourism experiences.

An analysis of the drawings and associated interviews with 8–11 years' old Chinese children in Hangzhou shows that they generally hold positive evaluations of their travel experiences with their family. Many aspects of family tourism are memorable. Key elements include the chance to be together with family members in novel and exciting



Fig. 5. Pictures of natural environments.  
Sources: images from interviewees, used with permission.



Fig. 6. Pictures of built environments. Sources: images from interviewees, used with permission.

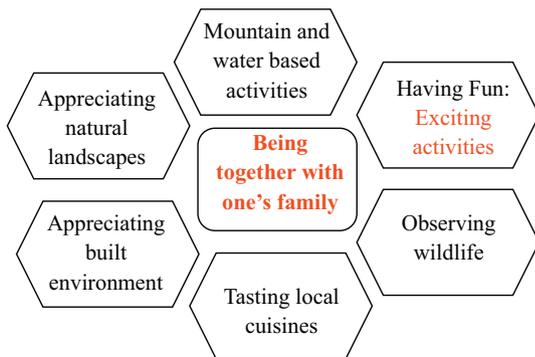


Fig. 7. Construction of Chinese children's memorable family tourism experiences.

settings, participating in various physical activities, encountering animals, tasting local food, and appreciating the diversity of built environments and natural landscapes.

There are considerable similarities between Chinese and Western children's perceptions as well as the voices of adult family members. This is not surprising since the children's experiences are gained as part of a group who, for the most part, participate in shared activities in the same places. A deeper examination of the results, however, indicates some distinctiveness. Although children travel in multiple styles, the most common are family tourism and school trips. The focus of the current study has been on family tourism and, not surprisingly, congruent with the importance of families in Chinese tourism (Wu & Wall, 2016), the family context, especially, in what are mostly one-child families, has been shown to be very important to the tourism experiences of Chinese children. Family togetherness, especially with their parents, is highly appreciated by the children, while interaction with siblings, peers, other tourists, and local people are only highlighted occasionally. This is quite different from their western counterparts who tend to give more emphasis to fun activities, and interaction with siblings and other children (Carr, 2006; Gram, 2005; Schänzel & Smith, 2014). The current Chinese family structure, which has been deeply influenced by the one-child policy, means that most of the studied children do not have siblings to travel or play with (Wu & Wall, 2016). Due to the society's limited trust of strangers and its intra-group communication feature (Fu, Lehto, & Cai, 2012; Khoo-Lattimore & Yang, 2018; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997), most of the Chinese children do not get much chance to play independently while traveling in an unfamiliar environment. Their parents or other guardians always keep them in their eyesight. As a result, having fun with new friends, and interaction with the hosts and other tourists, are only occasionally reported.

A second distinctiveness lies in the specific preferences for water and mountain based activities as well as strong appreciation of water and mountain related natural landscapes. While, throughout the world, these

environments are the settings of much tourism, this strong stated preference is a reflection of traditional Chinese culture. In China, Chinese literature, especially ancient poems, plays a considerable role in shaping tourists' destination choice, expectations, on-site behaviors, and experiences (Yan & McKercher, 2013; Yu & Xu, 2016). A school of Chinese poems, named *shanshui* poems (literally mountain and water), draws attention to such landscapes. It not only describes them but also expresses the poets' personal emotions as they contemplate the world. They address the unity between humans and nature (Xu, Cui, Sofield, & Li, 2013). Such poems are usually short, easy to recite, and are still popular and admired in contemporary China. Many *Shanshui* poems are integrated into Chinese children's nine years of compulsory education. The mountains and waters that are described have become household names for Chinese people, both young and old, stimulating the desire of Chinese families to travel and influencing their destination choices, gaze, on-site experiences and memories (Sun et al., 2015). That is also why many Chinese mountains, such as Taishan in Shandong Province, and West Lake in Zhejiang Province, are inscribed by UNESCO as both natural and cultural heritage. This explains why the mountains and waters, as well as the water and mountain-based activities are preferred by the studied children.

The third distinctiveness is the low perceived importance of accommodation. Previous researchers, such as Cullingford (1995), Khoo-Lattimore et al. (2015), Rhoden et al., 2016 and Hay (2017), indicated that accommodation matters considerably in children's favorite holiday recollections. In the current study, very few children highlighted accommodation facilities. This may be related to age, since our 8–11 years' old informants were mobile in the destination and enthusiastic about exploring more open novel environments, rather than staying in a resort/hotel. This may also reflect the current stage of Chinese tourists' preferences: many appreciate seeing and experiencing a great deal in a busy schedule, rather than staying within the confines of a (luxury) resort or sunbathing on a beach (Naidoo & Ramseook-Munhurrun, 2016).

A fourth difference lies in the children's perceptions of the dining experience during their family tour. Previous research in the western context indicated that dining out is an important family holiday experience for children (Blichfeldt et al., 2011; Hay, 2017, 2018; Therkelsen, 2015). These children enjoy dining in formal restaurants, which are different from the home dining environment. They note that they are observed by other tourists and like to display good table manners and behave well. They desire to try some unhealthy and exotic foods, which are usually not allowed at home. Also, they are critical and suggest that the design of the restaurants, facilities and menus can be improved to be more children friendly. In all, it seems that western children have much to say about their food experiences. In the present study, food is also a popular topic that is described in the drawings and in the following interviews. More than a quarter of the children highlight their dining experiences. However, it is centrally about savoring local cuisines, which are novel and unusual. None of them talked about dining norms in formal restaurants and other issues raised by western

children. This is probably due to three reasons: 1) the greater affordability of dining out in China, 2) the availability of diverse food, including different schools of Chinese cuisine and international food, and 3) Chinese middle-class families' frequent dining out experiences (Bai, Zhang, Wahl, & Seale Jr, 2016). Chinese children are familiar with none-home dining environments. As a result, food experience is not memorable unless the food is representative local food with either a good taste or unique presentation.

Considering the large and growing size of the Chinese family tourism market, this study offers practical implications to DMOs in both China and overseas. Firstly, emphasis can be given to the atmosphere of family friendly environments, which is centrally about togetherness and happiness. Particularly, the image of fathers interacting with their children can be highlighted, as fatherhood is much appreciated by both the children and the families. Secondly, many of the experiences identified by the Chinese children have something in common, i.e., they are novel. They are different from their daily routines. As a result, the contrast in experiences from urban life can be highlighted, for example, the relaxing rural environment, the excitement of theme parks, and the exotic food in the destination. Thirdly, links can be built between the tourism attractions and Chinese aesthetic values, especially their values towards the natural landscapes. The formal educational materials in China's nine-year compulsory education, especially in Chinese and Geography, offer insightful hints for DMOs to promote their destinations.

## 6. Conclusion

This study built on a review of the literature on family tourism, with a particular focus on children's experiences during these events. It addresses an under-researched topic of children's perspectives on tourism. It is novel in that it gives a voice to the children themselves, rather than relying upon their parents who may not represent their views adequately. It focuses on the tourism experiences of Chinese children who, as far as we are aware, have yet to be subjects of tourism research although China is a major tourist generating region with a massive domestic travel market.

With respect to research methods, a growing number of researchers are recognizing the power of photos and other visual materials for exploring tourists' experiences (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003; Pearce et al., 2015; Scarles, 2010; Schänzel & Smith, 2011a). In order to elicit information from children, this study used their drawings as a prompt to discussions about tourism and found this approach to be useful in eliciting children's voices which have not been well represented in most previous research (Khoo-Lattimore & Yang, 2018).

The findings of the study reinforce in many ways those of other researchers conducted with other age groups and in other locations. Thus, the themes that have been identified and summarized in Fig. 7 are widely applicable. Nevertheless, some findings appear to be place-specific, reflecting the Chinese context of the study. For example, the one-child policy means that few children travel with siblings and this makes interaction with parents, and even grandparents, more important. Indeed, the frequency of extended family travel groups, which consist of people with multiple interests and abilities, presents a challenge for suppliers, particularly in the Chinese domestic market (Wu & Wall, 2017). Also, the prominent interest in water and mountain settings, while widespread, appears to reflect aspects of traditional Chinese culture as reflected in the educational system.

The empirical study that has been presented has limitations that point to more research needs and opportunities. First, the findings that have been reported are derived from children living in Hangzhou, an economically and socially developed city in China. Due to the vast geographical coverage of China and the imbalance in development between cities and rural areas, the findings may not be representative of Chinese children in rural areas and secondary cities. Future research can be carried out in less developed areas of China to reach a more complete understanding. Secondly, future studies can address other age cohorts to see whether or not there are differences. It is possible that preferred

experiences may change as children mature and as their travel history expands. Thirdly, as noted in the literature review section, children and parents may have distinctive perspectives on the same travel experience (Carr, 2006; Therikelsen & Lottrup, 2014). Ideally, a study that seeks to give voice to children should also include parents' accounts, thus enabling comparisons to be made between different family members. In the future, Chinese parents' and their children's views of family trips can be explored. In this way, a comprehensive understanding of Chinese family tourism can be reached. Last but not least, China has recently initiated a dramatic change in its population control policy, i.e., the one-child only policy has been abolished and all families now qualify to give birth to two children. As a result, the structure of the nuclear family may change, although it is presently unclear how many will exercise the option to have a larger family. Children's family tourism experiences will likely be influenced if and when trips are taken in the company of siblings. Longitudinal studies can be conducted to see how change in family structure affects Chinese children's family tourism experiences.

## Acknowledgement

This work is supported by China Natural Science Foundation (No.71804030), the cross-disciplinary research projects in Zhejiang University (2017XZA228) and the Special Funding for Social Science Teachers' Teaching and Research Development, Zhejiang University.

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