

Exploring Chinese millennials' experiential and transformative travel: a case study of mountain bikers in Tibet

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to explore domestic experiential travel by Chinese millennials, a group of consumers who will increasingly influence the global travel and tourism industry.*

Design/methodology/approach – *A qualitative research method was adopted to explore motivations and memorable experiences of Chinese millennials who successfully mountain biked the Qinghai–Tibet Highway in China.*

Findings – *For Chinese millennial mountain bikers in Tibet, experiential travel motivations and experiences are important. During the trip, they challenged their mental and physical abilities, enjoyed nature, bonded with friends and perceived a warm welcome by Tibetan families. This study adds to existing knowledge on experiential travel, as it was found that transformation was perceived as important outcome of the trip. Participants perceived personal change in attitude and behaviour, which will help them face everyday life challenges.*

Research limitations/implications – *Further research could focus on gaining insight into other types of Chinese adventure tourists, on comparing wishes and demands of Chinese with other mountain bikers and on developments in transformative travel.*

Practical implications – *Adventure tourism organisations could adjust their tourism product range to cater more for Chinese millennials who aim to improve their physical and mental skills.*

Originality/value – *In-depth research into motivations and experiences of Chinese millennials is scarce. The influence of Chinese millennials on the tourism market is already large and will continue to increase.*

Keywords *China, Generation Y, Memorable experiences, Travel motivations, Mountain bike tourism, Transformative travel*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

Increasingly, Chinese millennials are experienced and influential tourists. They travel far more than previous cohorts of Chinese (Cheng and Foley, 2018; Wang, 2009), as travelling within and outside China has become much easier (Gardiner and Kwek, 2017). When travelling, they seek unique, fun and meaningful experiences (Allen, 2017), and are thus increasingly willing to try out new and adventurous activities (Hotel.com, 2018). They demand “experiential travel”, a worldwide trend involving purposeful and enjoyable travel to places which appeal to the imagination (Chan *et al.*, 2016). In the coming decade, Chinese millennials will significantly impact the global tourism market (Cheng and Foley, 2018; Fyall *et al.*, 2017). First, there are currently about 415m Chinese millennials, which is more than the population of the USA and Canada combined (Lu and Yiu, 2015). Second, their spending power will increase as they move up the career ladder (Hotel.com, 2018), meaning they can stay away for longer, visit new destinations and try out new activities. Third, millennials tend to be early adopters of innovations (Cavagnaro and Staffieri, 2015) and have a large influence on older generations' consumer behaviour (Doster, 2013; Migacz and Petrick, 2018). Thus, if a new tourism product or service is picked up by millennials, it is likely to also become a trend amongst previous cohorts. As Chinese millennials travel behaviour differs greatly from older generations, who grew up with less wealth and

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freedom to travel around the world, Ryan *et al.* (2017) state that more research into this group is necessary. Therefore, it is clearly important for the tourism sector to ensure sufficient understanding of this cohort's experiential travel preferences.

As part of their rising demand for new, adventurous and fun activities, Chinese millennials increasingly participate in domestic adventure tourism (Buckley, 2016). Commercialisation has facilitated a rapid growth in the now extensive adventure tourism sector in China (Buckley, 2016; Cheng, 2017). For instance, Buckley *et al.* (2014) estimate that about 80–100m young Chinese participate annually in white water rafting. Many such Chinese millennials will travel internationally in the future, with their expectations influenced by their experiences in China. According to Buckley (2016), it is important for foreign adventure tourism companies to understand the Chinese adventure tourist better, as their culturally driven wishes and demands often do not correspond with the existing nature of international adventure tourism products. However, despite these implications for the future of the global adventure tourism sector, there is still limited research on Chinese adventure tourists. As the Chinese travel market and, within this, the demand for adventure tourism, is large and still growing, Buckley (2016) and Gardiner and Kwek (2017) call specifically for more research on Chinese adventure tourists' wishes and demands.

This study addresses several gaps in the academic literature by aiming to gain deeper insight into motivations and experiences of Chinese millennials who participate in an adventure tourism activity, mountain biking, in China. The Qinghai–Tibet Highway was chosen, as this is a popular mountain biking route. The following research questions were investigated:

- RQ1. Why do Chinese millennials choose to go on mountain biking trips?
- RQ2. What are the major factors influencing Chinese millennials' choice of the Qinghai–Tibet Highway as their mountain bike destination?
- RQ3. What memorable experiences do Chinese millennials have during their mountain bike trip over the Qinghai–Tibet Highway?
- RQ4. Why do they regard their mountain bike experiences along the Qinghai–Tibet Highway as memorable?

Literature review

Experiential travel of millennials

Currently, experiential travel forms a significant trend in tourism. Experiential travel is defined as “more immersive, local, authentic, adventurous and/or active travel” (Peak and Skift, 2014, p. 7). Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) associated experiential travel with hedonic consumption, defined as: “those facets of consumer behaviour that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product use” (pp. 99–100). However, tourists have been found to be more than hedonic consumers. The view that tourists mainly seek hedonic experiences was challenged by Franklin (2003), who argued that tourists are more than superficial consumers of tourism destinations. With regard to millennials, Cavagnaro *et al.* (2018) also found that not all seek hedonic travel experiences. Some are interested instead in being active and adventurous, immersing themselves in the local culture and gaining authentic and meaningful experiences whilst travelling.

Travel motivations of Chinese millennials

Chinese millennials were born approximately between 1977 and 2000 (Benckendorff *et al.*, 2010; Gardiner and Kwek, 2017). They differ greatly from previous Chinese cohorts regarding values, behaviour and lifestyle, as their formative years took place during a period of fast and important societal changes (Cheng and Foley, 2018). They grew up during modern reforms and open door policies which created a Chinese middle class who was allowed and could afford to travel (Chung *et al.*, 2015). For Chinese millennials, travelling has become the norm. Compared to previous cohorts, Chinese millennials travel more for fun and entertainment, family bonding, social interactions and stress reduction (Chung *et al.*, 2015). They also travel to escape their parents'

control and find their “sense of self” (Gardiner and Kwek, 2017; Chen *et al.*, 2014). Chen *et al.* (2014) attribute the quest for self-discovery to the fast-changing nature of Chinese society, which causes young people to be uncertain and anxious about their future. Chan *et al.* (2016) found that Chinese millennials’ travel motivations are largely driven by experiential demands, which are strongly related to seeking unique tourist experiences and products. This helps Chinese millennials to differentiate themselves, contributing to a desired social status and thus creating their own “experiential travel journey” (p. 33).

Various studies found overlap between Western and Chinese millennials’ travel motivations (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2014; Gardiner and Kwek, 2017; Noble *et al.*, 2008). Like their Western counterparts, increasing numbers of Chinese millennials seek more involvement and submersion in local communities (Chen *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, Chen *et al.* (2014) identified five motivation factors of domestic Chinese millennial backpackers which correspond with those of their Western equivalents (Noble *et al.*, 2008): social interaction, self-actualisation, destination experience, escape and relaxation. Like young Western travellers, Chinese millennials see in travel a way to gain freedom, supporting their transition from adolescence to adulthood (Gardiner and Kwek, 2017; Noble *et al.*, 2008).

However, Gardiner and Kwek (2017) also found some significant differences; Chinese millennials feel greater moral obligation to meet their parents’ expectations regarding education, career, marriage and social family status. These pressures are expressed by avoiding risks in recreational activities. In addition, the upbringing of Chinese millennials is much more focused on education than on physical activities, resulting in less self-confidence regarding adventurous activities (Gardiner and Kwek, 2017). A study amongst young Chinese adventure tourists in China revealed that nature and relaxation, scenery, culture, exercise, escape, fun, challenge and learning were important motivations (Buckley *et al.*, 2014). It can thus be concluded that Chinese millennials are highly driven by experiential travel motivations, seeking freedom from parental control, escape from everyday life, social interaction, self-actualisation, destination experience and relaxation.

No studies were found specifically on travel motivations of Chinese mountain bikers, while only a few focus on mountain bikers’ travel motivations in general. Moularde and Weaver (2016) found that mountain bikers are intrinsically motivated to improve their skills and seek challenges. In addition, they choose destinations which offer sufficient challenges to increase their skills (Moularde and Weaver, 2016) and for natural aspects (Robertson *et al.*, 2014; Kulczycki and Halpenny, 2014). Mountain biking is undertaken to form personal identity and gain authentic experiences (Moularde and Weaver, 2016).

Memorable experiences of Chinese millennial travellers

Gaining insight into how to create memorable tourism experiences has become highly important to the tourism industry, as these drive future decisions, loyalty and provide word-of-mouth promotion (Pine II and Gilmore, 1998). The rise of social media has further increased the extent to which they contribute to destination promotion. These images and stories form a strong driver of follow-on tourism, whereby peers are stimulated to attempt to emulate the life-enhancing experiences of their pioneering friends (Wright, 2015). Kim *et al.* (2012) define a “memorable tourism experience” as “a tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (p. 13). They identify seven key experience elements that could affect its enjoyment and memorability: hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment (liberation and revitalisation), meaningfulness, involvement and knowledge.

With regard to memorable experiences in adventure tourism, it has been discovered that “flow” and “peak” experiences make the trip memorable (e.g. Dodson, 1996; Ayazlar, 2015). A state of flow is reached when individuals reach complete involvement with their activity, thereby perceiving a perfect balance between challenge and skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975), flow results in feelings of happiness. A “peak” experience, on the other hand, is described as a transformational experience which goes beyond the usual level of intensity, meaningfulness and richness of the experience (Privette, 1983). A peak experience leads to joy and self-fulfilment; the individual gains a sense of awe and achievement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Everyday issues are forgotten, and a sense of achievement is reached.

The individual perceives personal control and mastery, and gains awareness of personal power (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dodson, 1996).

With regard to memorable tourist experiences of mountain bikers, no studies were found on the Chinese and only a few on the Western context. Dodson (1996) investigated the relationship between peak experiences and mountain biking in the USA. She found that mountain biking can lead to peak experiences which lead to a change in self-concept and identity. In addition, Moularde and Weaver (2016) found that mountain biking is perceived as a holistic activity which leads to long lasting benefits such as good health, a way to express oneself, self-actualisation and feelings of group belonging, together leading to feelings of well-being.

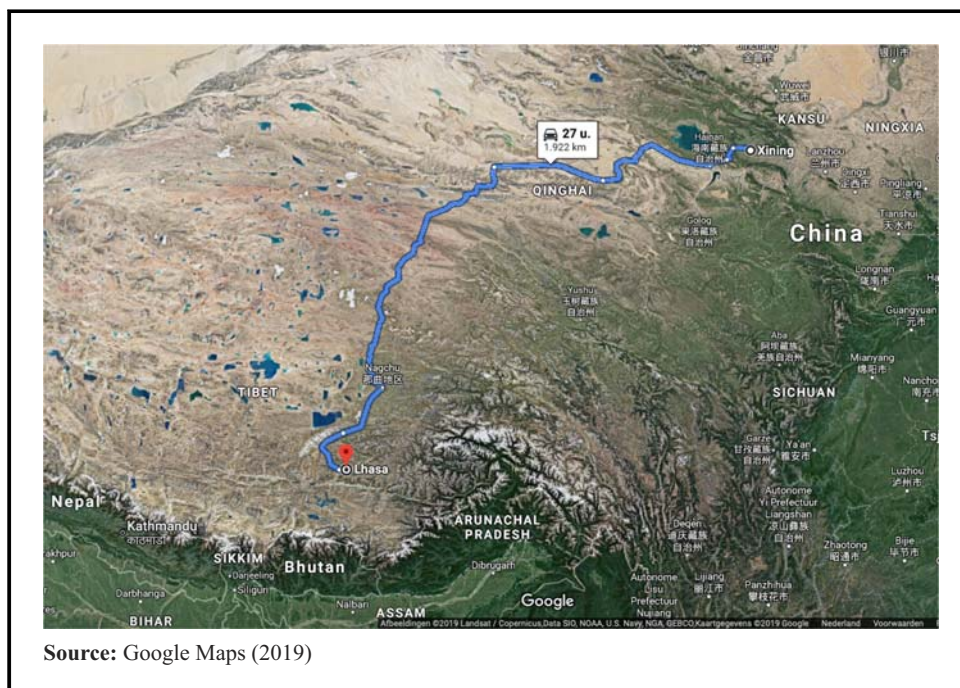
Despite the increasing importance to the tourism industry, understanding of Chinese millennials' adventure travel remains limited. Following recommendations for further research by Buckley *et al.* (2014), Cheng (2017), Gardiner and Kwek (2017) and Ryan *et al.* (2017), this study aims to gain a better understanding of Chinese millennials' travel motivations and experiences. As Chinese millennials form a heterogeneous group, this study focuses on a specific segment, namely mountain bikers in Tibet. To the authors' knowledge, this study is unique in applying a qualitative research approach to gain a better understanding of Chinese millennials and in focusing on Chinese millennial mountain bikers.

Methodology

The Qinghai–Tibet Highway

In this study, the Qinghai–Tibet Highway was chosen as a case study, as it is a popular route amongst Chinese mountain bikers (see Figure 1). The 2,000 km long route is asphalted, has a maximum incline of 7 per cent (Top China Travel, 2004) and takes about 21 days to complete (TibetTour.org, 2019). More than 80 per cent of the route is higher than 4,000 m above sea level (Su and Wall, 2009). The Qinghai–Tibet highway is regarded as the safest road to Tibet (Third Pole Tour, 2019; Top China Travel, 2004), although TibetDiscovery.com (2019) recommends tourists to travel by train rather than by car. Typical mountain road dangers are present, such as difficult cycling conditions due to steep and/or long slopes, small curve radius, precipitation, poor

Figure 1 Qinghai-Tibet Highway



pavement friction, roadside perils (e.g. deep ravines), long and dark tunnels, truck traffic and the possibility of fatigued and/or speeding drivers (Li *et al.*, 2019).

The route is promoted as relatively safe and technically easy, and suitable for novice mountain bikers, as it is asphalted and not too steep (e.g. TibetTour.org, 2019; China Tibet Train Tours, 2019). However, the route mainly attracts tourists who want to challenge themselves with rough climatic conditions (Su and Wall, 2009). The route is thus not suitable for all novice mountain bikers. They should be adventurous (Explore Himalaya, 2019), physically fit and in good health (e.g. TibetTour.org, 2019; China Tibet Train Tours, 2019) (Plate 1).

Research design

A qualitative research method was used to gain in-depth insights into the motivations and memorable experiences of Chinese millennial mountain bikers. The interview questions on motivations were based on the motivational push and pull theory of Dann (1981). With regard to formulating interview questions on memorable tourist experiences, the definition by Kim *et al.* (2012) was adopted (Table I).

The interviews were carried out at the terminus of the route in Lhasa, China in April 2017, in two popular tourist hostels and the Jokhang temple square in Lhasa, using a convenience sampling method. The fact that the interviewer is a resident from Lhasa who speaks Chinese facilitated gaining a deep insight into participants' motivations and experiences. Chinese mountain bikers between 20 and 40 years old, who were available at the locations, were approached for an interview, which lasted about 30 min each and were audio recorded. In total, 19 members of the target group were interviewed.

Plate 1 Mountain bikers on the Qinghai–Tibet Highway



Source: Tengxiage (2017)

Table I Interview matrix

Concept	Interview questions	Source
Travel motivations	For what reason do you participate in a mountain bike trip?	Motivational push factors (Dann, 1981)
	Why did you select the Qinghai–Tibet highway for mountain biking?	Motivational pull factors (Dann, 1981)
Memorable experiences	Please describe the most exciting memories of your trip	Memorable tourist experiences, Kim <i>et al.</i> (2012)
	Please explain why these experiences were memorable to you	

The participants were all in the age group 21–35 and were predominantly male (see Table II). They had just successfully completed the entire route to Lhasa by mountain bike. The level of cycling expertise was not asked.

Data analysis

The data were first translated from Chinese to English, then analysed and interpreted using coding. The coding process was carried out in three stages: open, axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2014). During open coding, the data were interpreted and clustered into several categories, which were then labelled. Then, axial coding took place, in which components that contributed to travel motivations and memorable experiences were identified. In the final stage, selective coding, core categories were identified and given an overarching code, for instance “to be physically and mentally challenged by the environment” (Table III).

Findings

Motivations

The main motivations are presented in Table IV.

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation
Kim	31	Male	Bikeshop owner
Techan	28	Male	Bikeshop owner
Chen	35	Male	Freelancer
Cheng	28	Male	Freelancer
Luo	29	Male	Freelancer
Ting	31	Male	Freelancer
Hu	28	Male	Hotel employee
Huihui	27	Male	Hotel employee
Bao	23	Male	Student
Chao	21	Male	Student
Han	22	Male	Student
Lao Niu	23	Male	Student
Ma	28	Male	Student
Xia	23	Female	Student
Lang	30	Male	IT specialist
Fan	30	Male	Unemployed
Mai	27	Male	Unemployed
Wang	27	Male	Unemployed
Zhang	29	Male	Unemployed

Two answer examples	Open coding (interpretation)	Axial coding (subthemes)	Selective coding (main theme)
Chen: “This route poses a big challenge, due to the high altitude, and low population density. I have to be well prepared to do this route. Actually, this route prepares me for everything in my life”	Being challenged by the environmental conditions Getting prepared for challenges in life	Being physically and mentally challenged by environmental conditions	To be physically and mentally challenged by the environment Expected to be physically and mentally challenged by the environment contributes to the motivation to choose the Qinghai–Tibet Highway as mountain bike destination
Fan: “I want to be challenged by the dangers of the mountains, the high altitude, and the extreme climate”	Being challenged by danger, high altitude, and extreme climate		

Table IV Main motivations

<i>Interview question</i>	<i>Main themes</i>
Reasons for participating in mountain biking	To escape daily life work-related stress family obligations
Reasons for selecting the Qinghai–Tibet line as destination	To have special experiences To be physically and mentally challenged by the environment The perceived attractiveness of the natural environment

Reasons for participating in mountain biking

To escape daily life. The findings show that reducing stress and seeking freedom are important reasons to go mountain biking. For some, mountain biking was regarded as a way to get away from unhappy situations in daily life; Wang (m, 27): “I went mountain biking to get away from stress at my work. I quit my job and decided to go cycling, and to stimulate myself.” Also Zhang (m, 29) indicated struggles with his daily life as a reason: “I am not happy about my city life, and want to try new things.” Getting away from it all, seeking freedom and looking for activities and destinations which can uplift their spirits, indicate that participants seek an escape from daily life, while at the same time trying to find and change themselves.

To have special experiences. Student participants mostly indicated that they chose this route as their graduation trip. Mountain biking in an environment which they perceive as beautiful yet challenging fit their demand for novel and meaningful experiences. Bao (m, 23): “This was my graduation trip. I wanted to do something different and meaningful.”

Graduation trips are a popular new tourism trend which motivates young people to participate in exciting, novel and adventurous vacation activities. They perform a ritualistic function for graduates of saying farewell to college life, escaping parental control, searching for personal identity and finding a new state of mind. A graduation trip is associated with seeking transformative experiences to mark the end of college life, and to prepare to start future careers.

Motivations to select the Qinghai–Tibet Highway

To be physically and mentally challenged by the environment. Almost all participants mentioned the opportunity to be challenged as reason for choosing the Qinghai–Tibet Highway. They wanted to identify and measure their own strengths and weaknesses by facing the Tibetan highland’s high altitudes and extreme weather, something most of them had often not experienced before; Han (m, 22): “through long-distance biking, I want to change my ideas, and become stronger and braver.” For others, the environment posed the challenge; Fan (m, 30): “I want to be challenged by the dangers of the mountains, the high altitude, and the extreme climate.”

Participants chose the destination because of its reputation as a challenging environment. Most participants said they had dreamt about visiting and had wanted to experience Tibet for a long time. Others were attracted because “the Tibetan Plateau is the roof of the world” (Techan, m, 28; Mai, m, 27). The significance of destination fame illustrates that the destination brand can strongly influence Chinese mountain bikers’ destination choice. These motivations represent the dream and desire to visit the destination and to gain higher social status by displaying their accomplishment.

The motivations show that the participants are very goal-oriented; they choose this route to reach certain desired outcomes, to challenge and test themselves and to apply their newly acquired insights to their daily lives. They regard the Tibetan highland as a place where they can test and measure their physical skills and mental capacities. Participants indicate that they want to develop personal resilience.

Perceived attractiveness of the natural environment. Most participants mentioned the perceived attractiveness of the natural environment as a main reason for choosing the route. Several participants also mentioned the opportunity to get close to nature. As Zhang (m, 29) stated: “The natural

landscape, because I have always lived in the city, and I can never get close to the nature.” Furthermore, participants selected this route as it is a famous destination for mountain biking, while others said that they had dreamt about visiting Tibet for a long time.

Memorable experiences

The main memorable experiences, and the reasons why they are memorable, are presented in (Table V).

Most exciting memories

Suffering. Suffering was mentioned by all participants as exciting memory. Suffering was caused by external conditions, such as the weather, altitude stress, wildlife encounters, perceived danger of the road and conflicts with companions. This resulted in mental and physical suffering. Study participants often considered giving up, but were strong enough to resist the temptation. Lang (m, 30) described a multitude of challenges: I felt loneliness and altitude stress, I had difficulties breathing. Although I knew that would happen before I started, it still felt so painful and difficult. One day, when I realized that I had cried, I thought I had a fever. That time I missed my family. I was afraid that I could not finish this trip and that I would have to abandon my companion.” Several participants mentioned experiencing fear, hunger, altitude stress and missing their family; K (m, 31): “I only biked 88 km today, but it was really hard because it was uphill, and there were many trucks on the road. It felt dangerous, especially through a very long and dark tunnel. This was the first time I felt fear of death. It had been snowing, I had altitude stress, I felt hungry, I was feverish, and biking uphill was so exhausting. I was almost broken. I missed my family.” Not giving up made them feel stronger afterwards; they felt that they developed a strong attitude.

As the participants suffered without giving up, they felt a great sense of fulfilment. Mountain biking on the Tibetan highlands requires a relatively high level of physical and emotional control. Taking risks, perceptions of danger and experiencing varying degrees of suffering results in a thrilling experience, and feelings of relief pride, and growth in confidence.

Overcoming difficulties. The suffering lead to the most favoured experience, namely overcoming physical and mental difficulties while biking over mountains in tough conditions. Achieving their goal lead to experiencing various degrees of flow, resulting in memorable peak experiences. Overall, overcoming physical and mental difficulties made participants feel proud of themselves, and confident about their capabilities. Comparing their own achievements with that of others made participants especially proud; Mai (m, 27): “When some people gave up and returned home, I kept going. I enjoyed that feeling, I am proud of myself.” Bao (m, 23): “When we ascended the Rubber mountain, we pushed the bike to reach the summit. This is difficult at such high altitude. I think this was my most memorable experience, because some bikers take a car to the summit; but we biked up ourselves.”

Overcoming environmental challenges was mentioned by Huihui (m, 27): “My most memorable experience is biking to Tanggula Mountain. There was snow at that time, and I felt altitude stress. But I still cycled to the top and got through it. I experienced difficulties and frustration when

Table V Most exciting memories and reasons why they are memorable

<i>Interview question</i>	<i>Main themes</i>
Most exciting memories of your trip	Suffering Overcoming difficulties Enjoying and having fun Enhancing social relationships Received hospitality by Tibetan families
Reasons why these memories are memorable	Personal change Social aspects of the trip Building personal resilience

crossing the mountains. But I did it; and that was a feeling of conquering. When I submitted each mountain, one by one, I was amazed that I could do it. It made me very proud of myself, and gave me a lot of confidence." Physical challenges were also mentioned; Ma (m, 28): "My most memorable experience was that I felt so hungry, but I still did not want to stop. I just wanted to reach the destination quicker. I think that the fact that I just wanted to keep going on was the most exciting memory for me. It is useful for my everyday life. As long as you do not quit, you can overcome anything. When I finished, I felt very satisfied, and proud of myself."

Participants firmly believed in their goal to complete the route, which helped them overcome mental, physical and environmental difficulties. These challenges made them more aware of their ability to solve problems and to adapt to changes. A sense of fulfilment, achievement and flow was experienced. The participants were satisfied with the accomplishment of their goals and having reached their destination successfully (Plate 2).

Enjoying and having fun. Participants also experienced enjoyment and fun. There are moments of silence and enjoyment of the natural surroundings; Bao (m, 23): "When we are biking, no one talks. We are all so silent, because everybody feels tired. But the scenery looks beautiful everywhere; this makes me enjoy the beauty of nature and the quietness." Mai (m, 27) indicated that cycling is a different way to experience both nature and culture: "Through the cycling experience I now understand Tibetan people and culture better. Other people cannot experience it; you can only feel it when you are cycling. Because mountain biking is a slow way of travelling, you can enjoy many aspects of nature." Cycling can be a way to connect with nature and culture, as it is a slow mode of travel. Being in natural surroundings gives participants a feeling of freedom; they can sing out loud and relax; Cheng (m, 28): "When I feel loneliness, I shout out over the fields and sing a song. Then I think, I can't do this in my normal life. So this is a different experience, I feel like I can relax more." The enjoyment also comes from the movement of cycling; Wang (m, 27): "I enjoy the feeling of being on my way." The experience of timelessness also adds to enjoyable memories; Xia (f, 23): "It is refreshing, I forgot everything. I just focused on the present."

Travelling slowly through a natural and cultural environment which is perceived as attractive, triggers an emotional response; it gives participants a sense of timelessness, and relaxation.

Plate 2 Study participant who arrived at the destination



Source: Tengxiage (2017)

It makes participants forget about daily life. They can simply enjoy and connect with the environment, with nature and culture, and live in the moment. This can be regarded as a flow experience.

Enhancing social relationships. Mountain biking can be an individual sport, and can generate feelings of loneliness. However, social relationships were also an important element of the experience. Trail companions played a significant role in helping participants to finish their trip. The importance of having a trail companion to provide inspiration, encouragement and company when facing difficulties was notable. Bao (m, 23): "Biking with friends, and experiencing both problems and happiness together was the most exciting memory. We could handle problems and encourage each other to overcome difficulties. It made our friendship stronger, we became closer, and understood each other better." Friendships can be strengthened by simple gestures; Cheng (m, 28): "When attempting my first mountain, I cycled for an hour without reaching the top. I felt very hungry. But when I finally summited, my team mate gave me some food. That was my most memorable experience." Sometimes participants felt friendship for the first time in their life; Zhang (m, 29): "My new friends show interest in me when I express my feelings or mood on social media. Before the trip, I always felt loneliness; that I had no real friends." These new friendships can lead to feelings of being at home, even in a strange environment; Wang (m, 27): "I have made many friends with different habits and interests to me. When I first stayed in a hostel, it felt like it was full of strangers, but later it felt like home."

The stories show that social relationships improved and bonding developed with friends, and even strangers. Mountain biking in a highland area is dangerous and risky. Participants made new friends. This means that they could open up and accept new things from strangers, who react and engage in a similar way. This created a happy and comfortable atmosphere, far away from their familiar home environment. Some of the participants indicated that this helped them feel closer to each other. The experience increased understanding and intimacy with their companions when they faced difficulties. Importantly, this shows that personal characteristics of honesty and trust in others are important values in challenging circumstances.

Received hospitality by Tibetan families. Tibetan hospitality contributed greatly to memorable experiences. The participants experienced Tibetan culture and perceived authenticity when overnighing with Tibetan families. The importance of family, receiving love, warmth and encouragement when needed, gave them a special feeling.

Luo's (m, 29) most memorable experience was staying overnight at a Tibetan home: "[...] I pitched my tent outside their house, and we ate together. They treated me as a friend. That gave me a warm feeling, because when I left home to go on this trip, no one had shown much interest in me. I will never forget that time and these people. If possible, I will visit them again." He clearly connected with the family, which made him long to go return there. This was an experience shared by more participants; Chao (m, 21): "When we suffered during a rainy day, we approached a Tibetan family to request a stay for the night. My most memorable experience was waiting for the food to be cooked, because I was so hungry. The Tibetan family was so friendly; they gave us food and a free overnight stay." Another much valued experience was the encouragement given by Tibetan locals they encountered; Wang (m, 27): "[...] along the road you can see lots of locals. They talk to you, saying 'Tashi delek' to wish their best and encourage us, even when they are busy working. This made me feel that they were very friendly, giving me a warm feeling."

The participants experienced an increased awareness of culture, people and the environment, which shaped their behaviour and attitude. Tibetan people interacted with the participants, creating value and benefit for those who asked for assistance. Hospitality and offering help is seen as a characteristic of Tibetan people; this was experienced and highly valued.

Reasons why experiences are regarded as memorable

Social aspects of the trip. Mountain bike experiences were often regarded memorable because of social aspects. Participants experienced new friendships, deeper bonds with friends, meeting and interacting with other mountain bikers and strangers.

Bonding with friends was important for many participants. Bao said: "My most exciting memory was biking with friends, and facing all problems and happiness together. We could handle problems and encourage each other to overcome difficulties. It made our friendship stronger and we got closer to each other. We also better understand each other now." Zhang discovered that he had made new friends: "[...] I found that my friends care about me when I express my feelings. Before that, I always felt lonely, I felt I had no real friends in my life." Some participants noted that they had become friendlier and more open to strangers. For instance, Wang (m, 27) mentioned: "When I had travelled previously, I did not talk to strangers, especially not to farmers or workers. But through this experience, I learned how to be friendly." Hu commented: "Because of the frustrations I had, I found that I had become friendlier to strangers [...]. I became more open. Therefore I am very happy with this trip, I got lots of things out of it. It is my best memory and gives the richest harvest in my life."

The strengthening of interpersonal relationships made it an unforgettable trip.

Personal change. When participants were asked why they found their experiences memorable, they mentioned personal change and transformation. Long-distance mountain biking has a great impact on participants' personal characteristics, attitude and behaviour. Several participants mentioned that they had become calmer. Chen (m, 35): "[...] It stimulated me to do things independently; I had to motivate myself. I now know that I can temper myself; the experience made me more patient, and I can plan better." A deep understanding of their sense of self was gained. Techan (m, 28): "[...] After suffering difficulties, I found that I had changed my attitude towards life. Cycling in Tibet is not about how strong or how good a cyclist you are, it is about your perseverance, persistence, and being goal-oriented. This was an exciting experience. I did not quit, because I had belief in myself." Participants indicated that they learned to persist, and that they gained confidence from their achievements.

Several participants indicated that they learned how to stay calm when faced with trouble. They felt that they had become stronger mentally, and more independent from their parents. The participants also felt they had made significant personal progress, which they reflected on, and which they perceived as being important life lessons. They identified personal change as an exciting and worthy outcome of hardship they endured.

Building personal resilience. A trip which started with a dream to conquer the Tibetan highlands became a life changing experience in which participants found their sense of self. The findings show that participants were deeply influenced by their experiences; Lang (m, 30): "I think Tibet is not the final destination for a mountain biker. The final destination is unrestricted, as long as you want to achieve something". Trip completion gave participants a sense of great achievement and pride, which made them feel they can handle anything in life from now on; K (m, 31): "It is just the usual cycling [...] in a highland area. The difference is that you need to endure many difficulties, such as physical sickness and mental struggles. But, after that, you gain a little more persistence, you have a stronger heart. As long as the road ahead is not broken, we will keep moving. We will pause for a while, try again, and then be closer to the end. The destination may not necessarily be a place; it may also be inside you." This shows that the experiences led to deep reflections and that reaching the physical destination may not even be the most important aspect of the trip. Getting to know and challenging themselves, finding their own independence, strengthening their own mental and physical abilities, and building personal resilience was valued most amongst participants.

Discussion

Motivations

This study suggests that participants' desire for experiential and meaningful travel is the most important driver to go mountain biking over the Tibetan highlands. This corresponds with the worldwide trend in purposeful and enjoyable travel to places which appeal to the imagination as found by Chan *et al.* (2016). Furthermore, our participants are motivated by escape: gaining freedom and reducing stress, which can be linked with their situation at home. Many participants

had just graduated, were in-between jobs, or were unhappy with their current life. These results agree with Gardiner and Kwek (2017), who state that Chinese millennial adventure tourists travel to gain freedom from work, school and family obligations. Our participants also seek travel experiences which help them overcome physical and mental challenges in daily life. This aligns with Chen *et al.* (2014) who argue that Chinese millennials travel to improve their personal skills and capacities. This also corresponds with reasons why Western mountain bikers choose certain destinations (Moularde and Weaver, 2016).

From experiential to transformative experiences

This study sheds new light into characteristics of experiential travel, as it was found that transformative experiences are perceived as very important. Participants regarded their experiences as life changing. Their descriptions suggest reaching a state of flow, as they felt totally involved in the activity, and close to nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Furthermore, participants showed perseverance by not giving up, developed pride in their personal achievements, and noticed a change in attitude and behaviour in themselves. Cognitive skills were developed, such as improving self-control, balancing personal capacity and adapting behaviour during extreme situations. These experiences can be regarded as transformative peak experiences: bringing joy and self-fulfilment and reaching a sense of achievement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dodson, 1996; Privette, 1983). When reflecting on their memories, most participants were aware of the transformative and life changing nature of their trip. They travelled to find the destination inside themselves.

Contribution to theoretical insights into experiential travel

This study adds to theoretical insights into experiential travel by suggesting that individuals may not travel only to escape daily life, to experience “fun, feelings and freedom”, to immerse themselves in different cultures and to find their sense of self. They may also travel to transform themselves, in order to better deal with everyday challenges in life. In the Cambridge University Press (2019), transformation is defined as “A complete change in the appearance or character of something or someone, especially so that that thing or person is improved.” The importance of personal change and transformative experiences also sheds new light on the nature of memorable tourism experiences, as defined by Kim *et al.* (2012). “Transformative experiences” leading to perceived improvements of personal attitude and behaviour (e.g. being able to talk with and trust strangers, making new friends), and the perceived improvement of mental and physical skills (e.g. becoming more patient), may be an eighth key element of a memorable tourism experience. Thus, memorable tourism experiences could be defined as hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, knowledge and transformation.

As individuals become more experienced travellers, they climb up their travel career ladder. They become more demanding, seeking travel experiences which improve their knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviour. In itself, transformative travel is not a new phenomenon. Personal transformation has long been associated with travel (Leed, 1991), as this was, for instance, an important goal for young English gentlemen to embark on their “Grand Tour”. However, due to today’s increasingly fast-changing society, demand for transformative travel may be on the rise. Besides dealing with personal uncertainties regarding finding work, starting families, coping with illnesses, falling in love and dealing with grief (Lean, 2012), individuals are also increasingly having to deal with the uncertain effects of global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, migration and political unrests. These uncertain futures may make individuals seek travel experiences which improve their resilience to change. Seeking transformative experiences may thus become a more important driver of travel in the near future.

Implications for adventure tourism sector

As Chinese millennial adventure tourists gain confidence and experience in travelling, they will increasingly visit more exotic and far away destinations. Due to increasing future uncertainties in daily life and beyond, their demand may develop from experiential to more transformative travel. Chinese millennials may seek more adventurous trips which challenge them on different levels, facilitate

personal growth, boost self-confidence and prepare them for their future life. These motivations could provide significant opportunities for international adventure tourism companies. They could adjust their tourist products to cater more for Chinese millennials who are seeking experiential and transformative travel experiences. They can offer individual and relatively safe adventure trips for novice adventure tourists, with a focus on experiencing local food and authentic hospitality.

Limitations of the study

First, this study focuses on Chinese millennials who succeeded in mountain biking the Qinghai–Tibet Highway. Their experiential experiences are thus characterised by success. Very different experiences could have been reported amongst participants who had given up en route. Second, this study focuses on a domestic adventure tourism destination. For tourism destinations abroad, results may differ. Third, the results of this study can only be regarded as an illustration of Chinese millennials' changing demand from experiential to transformative travel, as the study is based on qualitative research amongst Chinese millennial adventure tourists.

Recommendations for further research

To gain more insight into changing travel motivations and memorable experiences of Chinese millennials, it is recommended to do more in-depth research on this topic. It is also worthwhile for the international adventure tourism sector to investigate to what extent Chinese millennial mountain bikers' wishes and demands differ from their non-Chinese counterparts. These insights can support adventure tourism companies with developing new, or adapting existing, adventure tourism products which meet the specific wishes and demands of Chinese millennial adventure tourists. Finally, it would be interesting to explore to what extent the demand for transformative travel can be regarded as a new trend amongst contemporary tourists.

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