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'Gap Year' in China: views from the participants and implications for the future

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The present study is one of the first to assess the characteristics and consider the implications of the emerging gap year phenomenon within China. More specifically, the research answers three questions: (1) Who are the Chinese gap year takers? (2) What motivates the Chinese gap year participants' involvement in the new activity? and (3) How does the concept of a Chinese gap year differ from its Western counterpart? A netnographic study of 103 blogs was followed by 18 in-depth telephone interviews. The findings were compared with existing knowledge from studies about the Western gap year participants. It was found that individuals taking a Chinese gap year differed from their western counterparts both in demographic and behavioural terms. The type of gap year (career gap vs. pre-university gap) and forces from within the broader Chinese cultural context are producing a growing, distinctive and positively perceived travel phenomenon. The present study offers initial implications for international tourism marketing, as well as posing questions about the flexibility of educational programmes and human resource management in China; all of these interest groups might be able to meet the needs of this emerging niche market more creatively.

Keywords: gap year; China; concept; motivations; netnography

Introduction

The scale of Chinese tourism both within and beyond the country is well established (China Tourism Academy, 2014). Any new developments in the kinds of tourism undertaken by Chinese citizens is worthy of investigation since new directions have implications for China tourism itself, and how we understand Chinese society. Additionally, new Chinese travel styles and interests have potentially powerful effects on multiple host destinations (Cohen & Cohen, 2014). One such topic which is of broad interest and has potentially long-range consequences is the growing appeal of a Chinese version of a gap year. In late 2009, Sun (2009), a young Cantonese man who spent 13 months travelling across six Asian countries, published a book named '*My Late Arrival Gap year*'. In this book, he recorded stories about his travels, volunteer activities and his beliefs about a meaningful life, as well as his romantic encounter with a Japanese girl who became his wife.

Through Sun's book, Chinese people became aware of the 'gap year' concept (Liu, Gan, & Liu, 2013). Sun's writing and approach to his life were so well-received that a

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considerable number of followers have emerged. Special websites (e.g. freegapper.com) and focused online discussion groups promoting a gap year tour have been established. Multiple media outlets in China have now reported his story. Further, more than 30 individuals have now published their own gap year stories in a book format (see Amazon.cn) and the attention to this topic has been boosted by social media commentary and discussion threads. According to a survey conducted by China's most comprehensive online community, Sina.com, and one of the most well-known English training organisations, Education First, as many as 22.5% of their respondents (aged 18–28 years) are interested in a gap year if such an opportunity can be developed.

This growing phenomenon has, however, received little empirical research attention. This study seizes this opportunity and seeks to enrich our understanding of the evolving and involving concept of the gap year by examining Chinese participants' views. More specifically, it explores the following three questions: (1) Who are the Chinese gap year takers? (2) What motivates the Chinese gap year participants to be involved in the new activity? and (3) How does the Chinese gap year differ from its Western counterpart? Building on answers to these questions, the present study briefly considers some of the implications of a growing gap year phenomenon for Chinese and international tourism interests and educators. To assist in answering the questions, relevant literature will be reviewed and precise research directions highlighted.

Literature review

Considerable literature on the gap year concept and its effects can be understood for the purposes of this study by considering three themes. Initially, a succinct review of perceived value of the gap year will be outlined. Greater attention will then be directed to the second theme of the conceptual issues linked to this travel period. A subsequent section will portray the third theme of the motivations of those who undertake gap year travel.

Over the last few decades, the gap year has grown in popularity in many parts of the world. It was first seen in UK (Jones, 2004; Simpson, 2004) but gradually gained acknowledgement in Oceania (Curtis, Mlotkwski, Lumsden, & NCVER, 2012), then North America (Qian, 2013), later in South Africa (Coetzee & Bester, 2009) and then other parts of the world, including China. The popularity of the gap year has much to do with its claimed benefits to the participating individuals and the society. The effectiveness or outcomes of a gap year are only broadly relevant to the questions driving this study and will therefore only be briefly noted here.

Surveys of students' and employers' perceptions of the gap year have been conducted by commercial and voluntary organisations (American Gap Association, 2013; Crawford & Cribb, 2012). Most studies suggest that the experience is good for the participants. It is believed that a gap year experience can help the participants become more mature and independent (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; King, 2011). It may also help young participants acquire 'soft skills' and cultural capital needed in the modern world of work (Blackburn, Clark, & Pilgrim, 2005; Simpson, 2004). It is also seen as developing social values and experiences to better adapt to university life (Birch & Miller, 2007; King, 2011; Stehilk, 2010), improve personal status (O'Reilly, 2006) and, ultimately, to build employability in the job market (Heath, 2006). When paid and voluntary work is concerned, it is also beneficial to the society and community (Jones, 2004).

Two other themes of more specific interest can be identified within the gap year literature: the concept of the gap year and the motivations to undertake a gap year and this

material will be considered in more detail, as it helps to contextualise the present research effort.

Concept of gap year and the characteristics of gap-takers

The modern concept of 'Gap Year' or 'Year Out' has been a component of the tourism world for several decades. Some aspects of the gap year concept can, however, be traced to a much earlier era of travel, specifically the 'Grand Tour' undertaken largely by well-educated, upper-middle class, young men in the eighteenth century. In that earlier tradition, the notion that extended travel could benefit the maturity and sophistication of youth was a well-developed view (Hibbert, 1969). The meaning of a modern gap year derives more directly from relatively privileged young people in the UK, taking 'time out' before engaging in a more settled career (Heath, 2006). It is now increasingly commonplace worldwide. It is reported that about 11% of university entrants in the UK took a gap year in 2004 (Heath, 2006), while in Australia, the gap year participation rate was recorded as 6% between 2002 and 2004 for the University of Western Australia's students (Birch & Miller, 2007). Other studies from Australia (Lyons & Wearing, 2008), New Zealand (McIntosh & Zahra, 2008) and South Africa (Coetzee & Bester, 2009) reinforce the growing appeal of 'time out' which is spent wandering and engaging with unfamiliar cultures and new places.

Jones (2004) offers a well-cited definition of the modern gap year. He suggested that a gap year is 'any period of time between 3–24 months which the individual takes out of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory (p. 8)'. It can be noted immediately that although the word 'year' is used to typify the phenomenon, the break-away time often varies. Additionally and following Jones' definition, a 'gap year' can be taken during any period of an adult's lifetime. It is not limited to the pre-university gap years, but embraces a variety of gap-year-type breaks, including post-university gap years, career breaks and study breaks.

There are three further 'layers of choice' that define a gap year: location, structure and activity choice (Jones, 2004). A gap year can be taken within the country, but can also be overseas. Interaction with different cultures is often put forward as a way of becoming a global citizen and enabling the participants to broaden their mind; as a result, taking an overseas gap year is highly promoted, especially in the UK (Snee, 2013; Soderman & Snead, 2008). Industry bodies in the UK and some other western countries have played a role in defining the structure of the gap year for some participants. The particular development has been the creation of various commercial packages for the school leavers. A number of these packages include overseas voluntary and community service. This structured and sometimes expensive opportunity offers a relatively risk-free, supervised and controlled experience (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012). Other participants structure their own time and do not rely on service providers. A wide range of activities can be pursued during a gap year; for example, organised travel, independent travel, paid work, learning, leisure activities and voluntary work (Jones, 2004; Vandome, 2002). It is worth noting that gap takers may be involved in multiple activities.

Gap years represent a costly undertaking, and thus another important issue is the source of funding. Some common sources include parental contributions, savings, loans, sponsorship, paid work and subsistence expenses (Vandome, 2002). There is a stereotype that in the UK, the affluent, middle-class gap year participant is entirely funded for a year at the expense of their parents. Jones (2004) interviewed service providers and other

commentators and suggested that even young people from affluent backgrounds are likely to make a contribution to the cost of the gap year in order to support themselves. Most individuals are likely to combine two or more different types of funding sources.

Studies have established demographic differences across countries. For example, in the UK, a typical gap year taker is most likely to be a young woman from an affluent family with a private school education (Jones, 2004). Jones further suggests that while these characteristics remain common among gap-takers in the UK, the increasing frequency of gap-taking is associated with greater demographic diversity in the group, with rising numbers of participants from minority groups and state schools. In Australia, the gender difference and the education background (private vs. public schools) are only slight. Often the Australian gap year takers tend to be the low-achieving students, those offered low preference courses in the university, and those from regional locations and from English-speaking home background (Birch & Miller, 2007; Curtis et al., 2012; Martin, 2010). In South Africa, a typical gap year participant is similar to their British counterparts. They are more likely to be from upper middle-class white families and interested in travelling to other countries (Coetzee & Bester, 2009).

In an attempt to understand growing international interest in the gap year concept, it is valuable to consider related styles of travel. There are overlaps and links among the following thematic classifications of tourism types: volunteer tourism, backpacker tourism and slow travel (Fullagar, Markwell, & Wilson, 2012; Lyons & Wearing 2008; Pearce, Murphy, & Brymer, 2009). This list might be extended to include other descriptive categories defining activities and quests such as adventure tourism, environmental engagement, pilgrimage, trekking, self-discovery, spiritual tourism and working while travelling (Brown, 2005; Sin, 2009). Tourism researchers are repeatedly challenged by the overlap and fuzziness of these kinds of multi-attribute taxonomies and category schemes (Franklin, 2007; Lyons & Wearing 2008). For the purposes of the present analysis, it is possible to conceive of gap year participants as participating in any of these quests and activities and being labelled for some part of their time out as backpackers, volunteers or slow tourists. The distinguishing characteristics are that there is a clear trajectory in the gap year model; it is a liminoid space and travel time between structured phases of an individual's life; it is more than a holiday and less than a whole way of life.

Motivations to undertake a gap year

Studies concerning tourist motivation have been a part of the core tourism literature since the field of study began (Hsu & Huang, 2008; Pearce, 2011). Motivations to undertake a gap year have been studied by a number of scholars. This section will use the push and pull model (Dann, 1977) to organise the previous knowledge concerning the motivations. The push factors approach aligns tourism researchers' work with that of psychologists, while the pull factors are often defined as motives by marketers. Between the push and pull factors, there are some linking forces, which directly stimulate certain behaviour (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

The analysis of previous studies reveals that the key push factors include the desire to take a break from formal education or employment (Curtis et al., 2012), to broaden horizons through new experiences (Snee, 2013), to learn about the world (Birch & Miller, 2007), to gain life skills (e.g. leadership, communication, self-discipline) (Jones, 2004), to enhance one's soft skills (e.g. interpersonal, communication & process skills) (King, 2011), to understand oneself (especially the career choice) (Coetzee & Bester, 2009), to build one's CV in relation to gaining university entry or employment (Heath, 2006; King,

2011), to earn money (for university costs, to fund travel) (Heath, 2006; Stehilk, 2010), to follow the fashion ('everyone at school was taking one') (Blackburn et al., 2005), to be altruistic and help others (Griffin, 2013; Simpson, 2004), to build civic awareness (Lyons et al., 2012), to enhance one's status (O'Reilly, 2006) and for religious reasons (Jones, 2004).

Compared with the diversified motivations identified as push factors, the authors are not aware of any specific studies focusing on studying the pull factors for gap year participants. An examination of the informal advice literature as well as the promotion materials offered by service providers suggest that the 'exotic cultures' in the third world have very often been used as the selling point. Meanwhile, the great landscapes within one's own country are also highlighted in countries like Australia and North America. These observations are consistent with broader findings about young Western tourists' perceptions of the desirable features of destinations (van Egmond, 2007).

Some strong linking forces connect the push and pull factors. In the UK case, the educational context is found to be critical for post-school gap year participation. Many organisations draw post-school gap takers from schools where they have long-term relationships. Similarly, university career services play an important role in shaping the at-university and post-university gap year participants' decisions (Jones, 2004). In addition to the educational context, the information, advice and inspiration provided by peers who have taken a gap year play significant roles. This is also part of the reason why the promotional materials and the advice literature always include comments from previous participants and incorporate message boards (Curtis et al., 2012). Additionally, the parental view of a gap year and its component activities is an important factor influencing many young people's decision, as they are key gatekeepers in terms of authority, funds and support (Jones, 2004). Last but not least, the access to gap year opportunities is essential. Arguably, both the easily accessible Web-based materials and the publication of conventional paper media stimulate the interest in undertaking a gap year. Figure 1 below summarises the motivations reported in the existing literature about gap year participation.

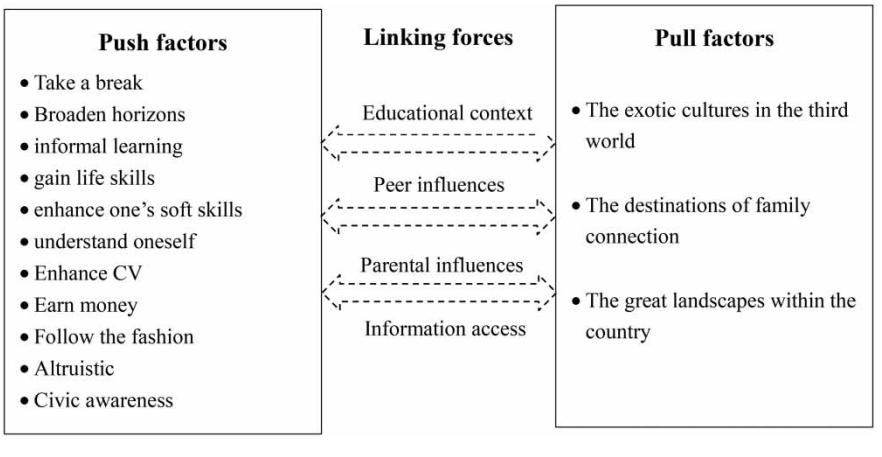

Figure 1. Motivations to participate in a gap year.
Source: Based on previous research: Birch and Miller (2007); Brown (2005); Coetzee and Bester (2009); Curtis et al. (2012); Griffin (2013); Heath (2006); Jones (2004); King (2011); O'Reilly (2006); Simpson (2004); Snee (2013) and organised by the authors.

Undoubtedly, the motivational profiles for individuals will vary and it is worth suggesting that Figure 1 only identifies the general motivations concerning gap year participation.

A synthesis of the research

By reviewing both the English literature (through Google scholar) and the Mandarin literature (through CNKI [China National Knowledge Infrastructure], China's most comprehensive academic database), we have identified some research opportunities which help shape the current study. These research gaps include,

(1) Studies that have been conducted on gap year tourism so far are limited in size and scope and are almost exclusively based on data collected in the UK (Griffin, 2013; Heath, 2006), Australia (Birch & Miller, 2007; Lyons & Wearing, 2011), the USA (Qian, 2013), Canada (Blackburn et al., 2005) and recently in some developing countries in South America and Africa (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Nieman, 2013). In the Chinese context, and although media reports have been common, only two academic publications were found (Ao, 2013; Liu et al., 2013). Liu et al.'s (2013) study, though empirically based, does not consider the characteristics of the participants.
(2) As noticed by some scholars, there are considerable differences among gap-takers in different countries. For example, the 'gap year participants' in the UK and South Africa tend to be the white youth from middle-class families in capital cities, and the activity is more common for young women (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Jones, 2004). In Australia, however, it was found that a large number of the 'gap year participants' were from regional and rural areas (Birch & Miller, 2007) and their most popular activities are work, study or training (Curtis et al., 2012). It can be suggested that further regional and national differences can be expected for China, due to both to its different cultural emphases on travel and learning and the rapid nature of its recent development.
(3) Without exception, all the 'Gap year' studies published in English are about school leavers' pre-university gap year experience (Blackburn et al., 2005; King, 2011; Martin, 2010; Simpson, 2004). It is, however, important to be aware that the gap year can be taken at other periods of an adult's life (Griffin, 2013; Jones, 2004). For example, Heath (2006) urged that studies should be more diversified and assessed the growing popularity of the post-university year as well as mid-career breaks among young people in their late 20s and early 30s. Following Heath, the research team considers that the opportunity to study other forms of a 'gap year' can potentially enrich our understanding of the evolving concept.
(4) The existing studies usually adopt a single research method, typically a small sample-size interview (3–20 interviews or sometimes focus groups are used) (Blackburn et al., 2005; King, 2011). Mostly, the researchers adopted a snowballing approach to recruit convenient interviewees. As some of the researchers have noted in pointing out the limitations of their own work, improvements in sampling processes or using another approach or employing mixed methods can be pathways for fresh studies (Lyons et al., 2012).

Based on the points identified above, the current study considers the emerging 'gap year' players in China using a combination of an initial netnographic approach supplemented by

intensive interviews. It explores the following research questions: (1) Who are the Chinese gap year takers? (2) What motivates the Chinese gap year participants to be involved in the new activity? and (3) How does the concept of a Chinese gap year differ from its Western counterpart?

Netnographic study: Assessing 103 blogs to understand the Chinese group

Two research methods, netnography and in-depth telephone interviews, were adopted in the current study for slightly different but complementary purposes. Netnography was used initially to build familiarity with the Chinese gap year group. The approach involved close reading and assessment of their rich online stories. The netnographic approach was also useful for the researchers to access the emerging group and conduct detailed interviews. Semi-structured telephone interviews were employed to obtain focused information about the involving and evolving concept of a gap year in China.

The following section reports how the netnographic study was carried out, as well as the results from this initial step. The material collected and analysed answers Question 1 and part of Question 3. This step also facilitated the design of the second stage of the current research – the semi-structured telephone interviews.

Process of netnographic study

Netnography is 'a new research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications' (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). The method was developed in the context of the increasing popularity of virtual communities where people share interests and build social ties. It is a naturalistic and unobtrusive methodology (Kozinets, 2002). Some of the special advantages of the technique applicable to the present circumstances include its reach in accessing geographically dispersed individuals and its capacity to offer a view of topics unimpeded by the orientation of the researchers' questions. It has been found to be powerful in gaining an insider's perspective on a given online culture in marketing studies, including understanding new tourism phenomenon such as international recreation driving (Wu & Pearce, 2013).

The current study commenced by carefully examining the travel blog websites that were written in Mandarin. In considering all the online travel WOM (Word of Mouth) channels classified by Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008), travel blogs and virtual communities were identified as the primary target because they provide researchers with considerable material for analysis. They also enable postings to be tracked over time. As a result, the four most popular online travel communities concerning gap year tours (Mafengwo, Qyer, Huwai and Tianya) were selected. Though open access to the public, the websites' terms and restrictions were first checked to ensure that it is ethical to use the materials. There were no issues limiting the study and its approach.

In July 2013, the key term 'Gap year' was used to search for detailed blogs. Initially 187 blogs were identified. A thorough assessment of these blogs was conducted. Blogs which simply introduced the gap year concept or only presented limited information were excluded from further study. Only the blogs offering rich information with identifiable demographic factors were selected for further study. In all, 103 blogs were chosen, with 51 blogs from Mafengwo, 25 blogs from Huwai, 17 blogs from Qyer and another 10 from Tianya. The value of choosing a substantial array of blogs follows good practices in assessing the saturation of ideas recommended in qualitative research methods sources. In a research landscape where the issues are unknown, then providing adequate

material from multiple sources assists in ensuring that the full compass of ideas are likely to be included in the portrayal of the issues and themes of interest (Gomm, 2004; Yin, 2009).

All 103 blogs were carefully read by one member of the research team who is a native Mandarin speaker. A profile for each blog was built, including demographic information, gap year characteristics and motivations to undertake a gap year. To obtain missing information, the same team member contacted the blog contributors through online message and identified herself as a researcher. Through these interactions missing demographic information was obtained. The material sourced in the 103 documents produced 267 pages of information.

The analysis of the data was conducted manually, because the data-set was reasonable in size, and could be organised quite readily as the research team was familiar with the context for the material (Kozinets, 2010). An established qualitative content analysis procedure was adopted (Berge, 2007). The procedure consisted of the following steps: identifying and checking user-generated quotes; developing analytical codes and allocating content to the codes; transforming codes into categories or themes and finally sorting material by those categories. The sorted material was examined for similar phrases, patterns, relationships, commonalities or disparities.

Results from the netnographic study: Profiles of Chinese gap year takers

Based on the identified demographic information in the 103 blogs, it is possible to assert that taking a gap year is becoming more popular due to the rising number of online blogs each year (the year by year information is presented in Table 1). Unlike their western counterparts, Chinese gap year participants are mostly not pre-university students. Two-thirds of them are actually on a career break. They have sometimes left their employment with no direct future job prospects but more commonly they are travelling in the gap between two jobs. Recent graduates (19/103) are another group of players, as they have a period of disposable time before starting their professional career. As a result, Chinese gap year participants tend to be in their late 20s or early 30s. Both males and females are equally active in taking the gap year. Geographically, it seems that the gap year concept is more popular in the economically developed coastal regions of China. Nearly two-thirds of the studied blogs come from the eastern regions of the country.

From the netnographic data, it was apparent that Chinese gap year participants tend to organise the tour by themselves. Travelling alone is very common (61.2%). Travel with one's friends and partner is also popular. During the gap year experience, travelling is considered as the dominant activity, though working and volunteering are sometimes observed.

Compared with their western pre-university counterparts, Chinese gap takers tend to commit less time to the gap year. The duration of their gap is fairly evenly distributed from less than a month to more than a year. The average period for the studied group is 142.2 days (min = 14, max = 510 and SD = 132.7).

Telephone interview study: Assessing focused information on motivation

Telephone interviews were chosen as the second step in the research process. Accessing the Chinese gap year participants can be very challenging in everyday life because the participants are often very busy and widely dispersed. This section describes the processes involved in conducting the telephone interviews and the results from this second part of the overall study.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of Chinese gap-takers.

Demographic	Items	Frequency ($N = 103$)	Per cent
Gender	Male	54	52.4
	Female	49	47.6
Age	Younger than 20	1	1.0
	20s	64	62.1
	30s	28	27.2
	Not specified	10	9.7
	School leavers	1	1.0
	Undergraduates	5	4.9
	Graduate	19	18.4
	Career break	71	68.9
	Not specified	7	6.8
Travel companion	Alone	63	61.2
	With friends	19	18.4
	With one's partner	17	16.5
	Others	2	1.9
	Not specified	2	1.9
Major activities	Travel	80	77.7
	Volunteer	4	3.9
	Working	2	2.0
	Mixed	14	13.6
	Others	2	2.0
Origins	Shanghai and around	19	18.4
	Guangzhou and around	24	23.3
	Beijing and around	20	19.4
	Northeast China	5	4.9
	Middle China	8	7.8
	Southwest China	13	12.6
	Northwest China	2	2.0
	Not specified	12	11.7
Year	2009 or earlier	5	4.8
	2010	7	6.8
	2011	19	18.4
	2012	55	53.4
	2013 till June	17	14.6
Duration	Less than a month	22	21.4
	1–2 months	21	20.4
	2–3 months	9	8.7
	3–6 months	13	12.6
	6–12 months	16	15.5
	Longer than a year	14	13.6
	Not specified	8	7.6

Process of semi-structured telephone interviews

The initial understanding of the group characteristics of the gap year participants in China assisted the interviewee selection. For example, in terms of gender distribution, slightly more male gap year participants were selected. As another example, those taking a break from their careers were a key target group, rather than simply seeking participants who were involved either before attending or after completing the university. In addition, the familiarity of gap year culture through the netnographic study also assisted the questions asked during the interviews as the researcher was frequently treated as a knowledgeable insider.

Interviewees were recruited through two approaches. First, online messages were sent to 52 bloggers (the odd number of the coded bloggers) identified in the netnographic study stage, with the researcher's identity disclosed and the research project introduced. Fifteen out of the 52 bloggers agreed to assist. Interview times and contact details were then obtained. Due to time conflicts, 12 out of 15 bloggers participated in the interview. The second approach adopted was through a key informant. One of the researchers has been interested in the gap year phenomenon for some years, and had personally come across several gap year participants. He contacted 13 gap year participants, 6 of whom agreed to be interviewed by telephone.

In total, 18 interviews were conducted in December 2013 (details are given in Table 2). The demographic distribution of the interviewees is consistent with the demographic profiles identified in the netnographic study (Table 1). All the interviews were voice-recorded with the participants' permission. The interviews lasted from 20 to 37 minutes.

Table 2. Profiles of the telephone interviewees.

Code	Gender	Age	Duration (month)	Destination	Key activities
TI-1	F	27	1	Tibet	Self-drive
TI-2	M	29	17	Europe, Southeast Asia	Travelling
TI-3	M	22	3	Tibet, Nepal	Travelling by thumb-lifts
TI-4	M	24	1	Southeast Asia, China	Travelling
TI-5	M	25	8	Across China	Travelling by thumb-lifts
TI-6	F	24	1	Tibet, Nepal	Travelling
TI-7	F	24	11	Tibet, Nepal	Travelling, volunteering
TI-8	M	26	17	Across China	Cycling tour
TI-9	F	30	8	Asia, Africa	Travelling
TI-10	F	26	3	Southwest China	Long-term staying
TI-11	M	29	2	Southeast Asia	Travelling
TI-12	M	24	3.5	Across China	Travelling by thumb-lifts
TI-13	M	26	3	Across China	Cycling tour
TI-14	M	26	2	Across China	Travelling
TI-15	M	23	12	Europe, Australia	Exchange study, volunteering
TI-16	F	25	1.5	Tibet	Travelling
TI-17	F	35	13	Across China	Travelling
TI-18	M	29	7	Across China	Cycling tour

Results from the interview study: Motivations to undertake a gap year

The 'push and pull' model, while not a theoretical model of motivation in itself, can serve as a useful organiser of the kinds of motives identified in this field (Hsu & Huang, 2008; Pearce, 2005). It is used in this study to organise the data and assist the succinct presentation of the material. An examination of the self-reported online materials, and more specifically the 18 in-depth telephone interviews, suggests that the Chinese gap-takers share some push-based motivational commonalities with their western counterparts. Individuals in both groups frequently consider a gap year as a chance to understand and enhance oneself (Curtis et al., 2012). The differences, however, are also substantial.

The distinctive push factors elicited from the blogs and interviews are not only consistent with leading tourist motivation studies, but also reflect deep Chinese contextual issues. These cultural influences are driven in part by the contemporary mix of consumerism, communism and adherence to the values of Daoism and Confucian teaching; all of which

resonate through Chinese society (for more details, see Arlt, 2006 and Pearce, Wu & Osmond, 2013 for an introduction). Key push factors include the desire to see other parts of the world, to develop oneself, to escape from the routine life/work, to relax, to better understand oneself, to pursue inner peace, to enhance relationships with the loved ones, to fulfil some kind of dream (visiting certain destinations), to do something exciting, to change a lifestyle, to follow the fashion of taking new activities, to experience some special interest (e.g. cycling, hiking) and to enhance one's status. The character of these motives tends to be less hedonistic and fun seeking than comparable western gap year motivations. Above all, the gap year motives for the Chinese respondents represent a high level of involvement and commitment to purposeful activities and goals during the special time period. Typical quotes include,

> I was not sure whether I liked my life or not. Thus, I left my job and despite some debts, travelled hand in hand with my husband, around the world. For the gap year tour, I sought to find courage and confidence, to affirm my beliefs and find more of my true self. This gap year was the most precious gift for my 30th birthday (TI-9)
>
> I met my primary school friends recently. We had not seen each other for many years. How time flies! It has been 20 years. The next 20 years will pass soon as well. . . . If we hesitate, we will never get the chance to experience some things. Now, while the dream is still alive, I would like to give myself the last chance to be on the road, to broaden my views and to make my life more colorful. . . . (TI-5)

Compared with the diversified push factors, pull factors tend to be very focused in the current study. They are mainly concerned with the attractiveness of certain destinations, and in many cases, it is the exoticism of the unfamiliar destinations. For example, a lady who left her job and enjoyed a one-month gap experience with her husband by driving to Tibet from their hometown in coastal China, commented,

> One vehicle, two persons, a trip of dreams, our Tibet trip, finally started. . . . It was a trip about belief, youth and dreams. I need to be on the roof of the world (Tibet). I need to be there to find my belief (TI-1).

Besides the destination issues, the positive images of gap year tours also act as a pull factor. In China, the gap year symbolises aspects of the lifestyle of affluent western youth, and is associated with perceived benefits for one's career development and personal growth. A young man in his late 20s, who spent 7 months cycling around China, suggested that,

> I came upon the concept of gap year by accident when I was wandering in a book store in the train station. Sun's (the author of My Late Arrival Gap Year, who introduced the gap year concept to China) story was very inspiring. I checked more information online about its origins and its viewpoints. This is a lifestyle very different from my 9am–5pm routines. . . . (TI-18)

In addition to the push and pull factors, there are some linking forces, which stimulate the potential gap year takers' interests in creating a period of time out from formal education, training or the workplace. These linking forces fall into three categories: work related, information related and other forces. The work-related forces include experiencing a bottleneck in one's career, the time available between two jobs, being tired or bored with the current job and not satisfied with the previous job, but not yet in a new job. The information-related forces cover issues such as the awareness of the gap year lifestyle, the influence from the current media reports (e.g. books, movies, documentaries) and the stories shared by

(online) friends who are gap year participants. The last set of linking forces are very diversified but influential and include the availability of a companion, the promotion of affordable air tickets, personal travel experiences and the support from one's family.

Figure 2, building on the organising scheme of the push–pull model, concisely presents the motivations of Chinese gap year participants.

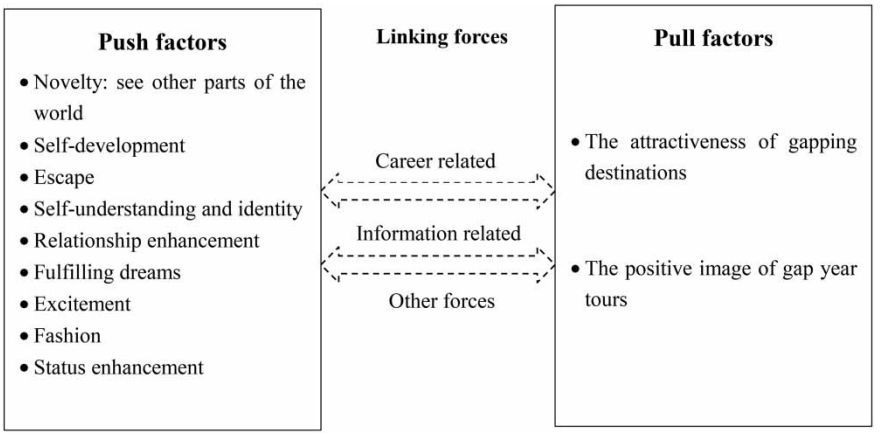

Figure 2. Motivations to undertake a gap year: Chinese participants' perspectives.

Conclusion and discussion

The idea of a gap year has been growing and developing in western countries for at least three decades. It is, however, only recently seen in China. This study used netnography and semi-structured telephone interviews to explore the social characteristics of the emerging Chinese gap-takers and their motivations to be involved in the activity. Considerable differences between Chinese participants and their western counterparts were identified (Table 3).

Over 35 years ago, Cohen (1979) advised that in order to describe tourism more insightfully, good research should be emic, contextual, processual and longitudinal. This study, using the gap year participants' emic voices (through blogs and interviews), has also identified the powerful influence from the contextual and cultural issues in China (Pearce, 2011; Scott & Selwyn, 2010). The authors suspect that the roots of the substantial differences between Chinese gap-takers and their western counterparts lie in the type of gap as well as issues arising from the broader cultural context. In China, the gap year is mostly a 'career break', rather than post-school, pre-university gap or study breaks. This is partly due to the Chinese higher education system, where it is not easy or common to defer one's formal study. In China, one needs to go through very competitive examinations to gain a position in a university. Once enrolled in the university, the students need to follow very closely the study plans and times suggested by the university. Unlike the more flexible credit-based approach in many western higher education institutions, it is very time consuming and difficult to receive administrative approval to defer or change one's programme in most Chinese universities. Further, due to a plentiful labour force, especially for the low-skill jobs, the Chinese job market is mostly based around full-time employment. It is not easy for either school or university students to find part-time or casual jobs, so the younger students have few financial resources. In addition, going directly

Table 3. Chinese gap-takers vs. Western gap-takers.

Comparative items	Chinese gap-takers	Western gap-takers
Gap type	Mostly career gap	Mostly pre-university gap
Gender	Slightly more male	More female participants
Age cohorts	Late 20s and early 30s	18 to early 20s
Key activities	Dominantly travel, working	Work, volunteer and travel
Organising style	Mostly unstructured (self-organised); the majority of them travel alone	Both structured and unstructured styles are popular. Many choose packaged service
Duration of gap	Evenly distributed from 1 month to more than a year	From 3 to 24 months, generally more than 6 months
Funding	Mostly self-sponsored	Parental contributions, savings, loans, sponsorship, paid work and subsistence expenses
Gapping destinations	The exotic southwest China (especially Tibet) and southeast Asia is most popular; Local Chinese communities are not their interest	The third-world destinations are popular for volunteering gap-takers; domestic destinations and local communities are also well received
Motivations – push factors	Novelty: see other parts of the world; self-development (broaden horizons, to be mature, independent and confident); escape/take a break; self-understanding; excitement; status enhancement; fashion relationship enhancement and fulfilling dreams	To enhance CV in relation to gaining university entry or employment; to earn money; altruism (community work and volunteering); civic awareness
Motivations – pull factors	The attractiveness of destinations; the positive image of gap year; spiritual and self-development destinations	Mix of hedonistic and self-development destinations
Linking forces	Work-related issues (the career bottleneck; the gap between two jobs; boredom with working); information	Encouragement from school and intuitional context; peer and parental support and advice; access to information

to university after school is regarded as a natural transition by family and society. Further, deferring one's study for other reasons other than health is usually not accepted, and is even frowned on by many families.

By way of contrast, those who have been working for a few years are relatively more affluent, independent and mature. Their decision to undertake a gap year experience is accepted more readily by their peers and the society. These observations are supported by a number of recent studies which have emphasised the influence of the wider social-cultural and institutional issues on tourists' behaviour and community's attitudes (Franklin, 2007; Kwek & Lee, 2010; Wu, 2013).

It can be noted again that there is a wide spectrum of related youth behaviours some of which overlap with and become part of gap years for some participants. These terms and the related literature have mainly been studied in varied international contexts and include backpacking, volunteer tourism and undertaking working holidays (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; Noy & Cohen, 2005). Studies which explore the links among these groups and

their activities and Chinese responses to these styles of life stage travel can be pathways for further research exploration. In particular, the specific constituents of a gap year in the Chinese context and the varied effects of these components on the total experience could repay further specific study.

It should be emphasised, however, that the Chinese gap year concept is substantially different from the western practice, though they are united by the similarity that there is a discontinuity in the trajectory of education and or life at work. In all these contexts, it is worth re-emphasising that gap year participants are more than simply short-term holiday break tourists. In the Chinese context, the gap year is more about a career break undertaken by the young generation in their early-career stage. They take a period of time, mostly not as long as the western pre-university gap year participants, to travel to other parts of the world, especially to exotic destinations.

One of the overarching themes to emerge from this study lies in the strong emphasis on the transformational possibilities of gap year travel, as reported by the Chinese respondents. Their comments can be linked to the transformative power of 'time out for travel' and the essential liminality of the experience in the lives of the participants. The findings can be juxtaposed with recent attention to fulfilment and self-development possibilities in engaged, spiritual and extended travel (Ross, 2014; Sin, 2009). The themes point the way to further comparative studies, possibly using structured questionnaire completion formats which seek to understand the role of travel in generating commonalities in personal fulfilment across countries and continents.

For international and distinctive destinations seeking to market themselves to Chinese gap year participants, several initial suggestions can be developed from the present study. Since the duration of the Chinese gap year exceeds that of ordinary international tourists, the creation of at-destination opportunities for involvement and understanding of the host community and environment become all important destination attributes. These forms of involvement might be living with local hosts, special volunteer projects and opportunities to learn skills. Further options can extend to access to difficult and environmentally spectacular locations through structured tourism businesses. There is often an interest among the Chinese gap-takers in spiritually uplifting and meaningful experiences and locations. Services including the availability of having or cooking Chinese food and some Mandarin translation may be required although English-speaking skills are developing rapidly in modern China and in the future will facilitate travel to many more international destinations. Destinations that develop these opportunities may be able to position themselves as 'gap year friendly' and re-organise components of their tourism product to meet the multiple motivations of this younger emerging Chinese market who differ from the more hedonistic young western back-packer groups with which many destinations are familiar with (van Egmond, 2007).

There are additional nascent implications for Chinese institutions as the gap year concept develops and becomes more popular. It can be argued that the strong structures and tight expectations in Chinese society surrounding educational attainment and a fixed trajectory through the demanding high school, and then university system, are not broadly sympathetic to the gap year concept. It may be that in the future educational institutions in China and parental and societal tolerance for an early gap year time could evolve if research reveals that the benefits of the activity are substantial in terms of the sophistication and competence of its participants. Taken another wider view of the implications of the research area, human resources departments in China may find that offering time away from work improves the long-term retention and productivity of its younger workers. These developments could see a further evolution and prominence of the gap year in the Chinese context.

Netnography has been useful in offering insights about new tourist activities (Wu & Pearce, 2013), but also has its disadvantages. For example, the blog contributors may only represent a sub-community of the gap-takers. As noted earlier, netnography was undertaken partly because that gap year is very new in China and it is very challenging to access the geographically dispersed gap-takers. Further insights about the characteristics, motivations and impacts of gap year tourism in China can be pursued in future studies through teams of researchers using snowball sampling thus potentially providing a more exhaustive penetration of the group. In these ways, a larger and more representative sample will be possible. As another allied research direction, longitudinal studies may also investigate the personal and cultural meanings and trajectories embedded in this phenomenon. Such studies of individual tourists and their choices may potentially be used to understand the impact of social and cultural reforms in China.

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