

Chinese visiting Rovaniemi, Finland: profile and perceptions of Arctic tourists

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Abstract The profile of the Chinese tourist is changing. Outbound tourism destinations for Chinese tourists are no longer limited to the Asia-Pacific region. Chinese tourists visit many different destinations, and the areas around the Arctic Circle are growing in attraction. This paper is based on a 2016 online survey about Chinese tourists visiting Rovaniemi, Finland. The questions were based on a previous study of the Finnish Tourist Board conducted in 2003. The results were analyzed and the two studies were compared. The resultant profile of the Chinese tourist visiting the Rovaniemi area showed natural landscapes to be the most important attraction. All respondents had a “must-do” activity, and more than half participated in sport and leisure activities. The state of the environment, natural landscape, and safety conditions were rated most important among tourists. Increasingly, tourists prefer to organize individual trips, using multiple information channels. Currently, Chinese tourists demand deeper tourism experiences. They want to enjoy winter activities in a pure environment, and unique experiences, such as sleeping in an ice or glass hotel. Chinese tourists appreciate the uniqueness that cannot be found in other places. They wish to benefit from travel information from various media, which will allow Chinese tourists to make a complete plan before their journey.

Keywords Chinese outbound tourists, Arctic, tourist profile, tourist perceptions

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1 Tourists' perceptions

Perception is “the acquisition and processing of sensory information in order to see, hear, taste, smell, or feel objects in the world”^[1]. An individual's perception of traveling is determined by the individual's perception of the world, and by a range of external factors, such as childhood, family, work, as well as wider societal and cultural influences^[2]. Furthermore, perceptions about images of places are formed through advertising and promotion, news accounts, conversations with friends and relatives, travel agents, and past experiences.

Preferences for tourist destinations are largely dependent on the favorableness of perceptions of those destinations, and advertising is one of the most efficient means of conveying

images that influence public perceptions^[3]. Tourists' perceptions of a territory are based on representations of their individual aspirations and desires. Places with high image ability (i.e., evoking strong images to observers) take precedence in tourists' selection of attractions^[4]. Based on accounts from books, films and friends, the tourist travels with a very precise image of the destination, giving life to myths, and substance to their dreams and mental representations.

Expectation is a crucial component of tourists' experience of a place. A range of secondary sources contribute to pre-visit knowledge or expectations, which influence the actual experiences of tourists^[5]. Each person perceives a unique sense of place, which is fueled by the individual's imagination, past experiences of other places, personal trajectory, and background^[6-7]. Sense of place is an open, complex notion that derives from multiple influences, such as sensuous experiences of a place, including the meanings,

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emotions, and feelings of attachment and belonging associated with that place^[7]. Mayo and Jarvis^[8] defined destination attractiveness as “the perceived ability of a destination to deliver individual benefits”. Given that destinations are places that offer a combination of tourism products and services^[9], an integrated perception of a place’s products and services is a necessary precondition for consumers’ emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. In particular, destination attractiveness refers to tourist feelings and opinions about a destination and its perceived ability to satisfy their needs^[10-11]. The choice of destination emerges, on the one hand, from travelers’ needs and desires for travel, which are driven by their capacity and taste. On the other hand, the choice of destination is based on the opportunities and products offered by available destinations to fulfill travel needs and desires^[12].

2 Chinese outbound tourism

Since China’s steady opening and reformation beginning in 1978, the national economy developed rapidly. This led to a dramatic increase in personal income and Chinese demand for outbound tourism has been increasing. Arlt W G^[13] recently labeled the new movement of Chinese outbound tourism as a second wave of tourism. The second wave of tourism was characterized by three factors: first, the Chinese market is large, affluent, and rapidly growing; second, there is a considerable growth in independent tourists; and third, the Chinese market has a high-tech nature^[14], wherein online travel communities focusing on independent travel have been established and have considerable numbers of participants.

2.1 Characteristics of Chinese tourists

Data published by Marketing China outline the following trends in the Chinese tourism market^[15]:

- (1) Tourism applications, for both technology and infrastructure, are increasing;
- (2) Chinese travelers are demanding more personalized tours;
- (3) Visas are no longer a barrier for Chinese travelers;
- (4) The Chinese tourism market features a high-class and low-cost phenomenon;
- (5) Travelers are also affected by the idol effect.

2.1.1 Increase of tourism applications

Although many Chinese tourists still rely on tour operators and travel agencies for managing their trips abroad, the internet is increasingly being used to make travel bookings directly. In addition, the majority of Chinese tourists now use mobile phones, specifically mobile applications, for travel bookings. With the growing popularity of the internet and mobile technology, more Chinese nationals will make online bookings.

2.1.2 Chinese travelers demand more personalized tours

Although more than half of all Chinese travelers seek help from tour operators or travel agencies, increasing numbers of

Chinese tourists are organizing their trips independently. Tour operators normally provide travel itineraries; however, as reported by Marketing China, a growing number of Chinese travelers prefer to plan and are interested in booking trips to destinations of their choice, rather than following preset tour schedules^[15].

2.1.3 Visas no longer a barrier for Chinese travelers

For Chinese nationals, it has become considerably easier to acquire visas to travel to countries such as Australia and Singapore^[15]. In the case of the United States, for example, since November 2014, Chinese travelers have been allowed to apply for a multiple-entry visa for ten years instead of the previous limit of one year^[16]. The United Kingdom is among the few countries in Europe to provide special travel benefits for Chinese tourists; group travelers are also given special privileges. Those who have been granted a Western European visa may receive a UK visa without the need for further interviews^[17]. The holders of a Schengen visa can travel within Schengen countries^[18]. Very few Chinese travelers reported visa issues as deterrents for visiting foreign countries.

2.1.4 The high-class and low-cost phenomenon in the Chinese tourism market

As the Chinese economy grows, China’s wealthiest are traveling more frequently, and wealthy individuals travel an average of 2.5 times each year. Although affluent Chinese nationals are more willing to travel, the majority of them still prefer low-cost travel. Therefore, those consumers tend to choose cheaper options during their trips, hence the “high-class, low-cost phenomenon”^[15].

2.1.5 The idol effect

Recently, a Chinese TV travel program called “Huayang Jiejie”(Sisters over Flowers) was launched by Shanghai TV. The show follows five famous Chinese actresses who travel with two actors to Turkey and Italy. According to a report from Shanghai Dragon TV, this program is very popular, having achieved the highest audience ratings. A TV travel program involving idols can therefore attract Chinese people’s attention, potentially encouraging them to visit the destinations visited by famous idols^[19].

3 Methodology

An online questionnaire survey was conducted to collect Chinese tourists’ perceptions of visiting Rovaniemi, Finland.

The questionnaire comprised 16 questions and was written in Mandarin to ensure that all respondents could clearly understand all questions. Information on socio-demographic characteristics and trip-related characteristics were collected, as well as Chinese tourists’ satisfaction levels in relation to 12 attributes on a five-points scale (ranging from least to most satisfied). Chinese tourists’ impressions of the Rovaniemi visit before and after the trip were compared.

The questions were based on a previous survey, conducted by Tong Tuominen in 2003 for the Finnish tourism board^[20]. This specific study was chosen mainly because Finland is not covered by the Approved Destination Status (ADS) until 2004. ADS is a scheme that authorizes approved countries to receive leisure tour group travelers from China^[21]. A comparison with the data collected in 2003 before the new outbound tourism policy was launched shows changes in Chinese tourists' preferences. The questionnaire was posted on an online survey system from 15 April 2016 to 25 May 2016. First, QR-code of the survey¹ was sent to two tour guides, who helped to approach Chinese tourists who were in Rovaniemi during the study period. Convenience sampling was employed and tourists were asked if they were willing to participate in a survey. Second, given that this study was conducted during the low season for travel to Rovaniemi, and in order to reach a larger sample, the link of the online survey was sent to blog writers at Qyer.com. Compared with other online travel booking websites in China, Qyer.com is the first and most popular user-generated content website for Chinese outbound tourists, especially those traveling to Europe^[22]. Therefore, by distributing the questionnaire through this website, we expected to reach a larger sample of target respondents. Purposive sampling was applied to find respondents who met the study criteria, which were as follows: Chinese tourists who were at Rovaniemi during the study period or preceding 6 months. There were 103 respondents were collected. Because the questionnaire was managed through an online survey system, preliminary data analysis was done automatically. Relevant variables were compared and the responses for open-ended questions were summarized using key words.

4 Findings

Among the respondents, 26 to 35 year olds were the most represented age group (55.3%, Table 1); however, older, "empty-nesters" were also considered important because their children have left home, and they tended to be financially stable^[23], they have good pensions, they are flexible in terms of time, and so they can travel^[24].

4.1 Rise of independent tourism

Chinese tourists consider that independent travel offers some advantages, such as being able to control one's own itinerary^[25], creating an individualized experiences^[26], enhancing one's knowledge and skills^[27], and generating a sense of social status and personal pride^[28]. Recent research on Chinese independent tourists has suggested that, compared with group tour participants, independent tourists tend to have significantly more travel experience and are more critical about onsite management^[29]. Given that, in China, education and language skills are improving^[30], economic growth is predicted to continue^[14], and citizens can obtain visas more easily^[31], it is anticipated that the number of independent Chinese tourists will continue to grow, possibly leading to new trends for the whole market^[13].

Table 1 Demographic information of respondents in 2016

		Σ	Percentage
Gender of respondents	Male	41	39.8%
	Female	62	60.2%
Age of respondents	<18	0	0.0%
	18–25	21	20.4%
	26–35	57	55.3%
	36–55	18	17.5%
	56–65	7	6.8%
	>65	0	0.0%
		N=103	

Table 2 shows that there has been a dramatic change in travel preferences. While group tours remain popular among overseas Chinese tourists, increasing numbers of Chinese people are travelling independently. QR code (abbreviated from Quick Response Code) is a type of machine-readable matrix barcode (or two-dimensional barcode) that contains information about the item to which it is attached. By scanning the QR code with tourists' own mobile-devices, like smart phone, respondents can access the questionnaire and fill in it with their own equipments in their convenient time. In 2016, more than 72.8% of Chinese tourists had independently planned their journeys. In 2003, the majority of Chinese tourists (81.3%) travelled in groups^[20]. According to a nationwide survey on travel agencies in China, 70.25 million Chinese tourists went abroad in 2011, 20.21 million of whom traveled with groups^[36]. Thus, in 2011, more than 70% of outbound tourists travelled in a relatively independent way. In 2016, a small group emerged among tourists (8.7%) that preferred tailor-made trips. Such trips may be planned by travel agencies or online tour operators; however the individual does not travel with a tour group.

Table 2 Travel preferences

Generally, in which way will you travel?	Percentage in 2016	Percentage in 2003 ^[20]
I plan the journey myself, completely	72.8%	15.4%
Individual travel, plan set by others	8.7%	–
I travel with a group, and never plan my journey by myself	18.5%	81.3%
No answered		3.3%
		N=103
		N=123

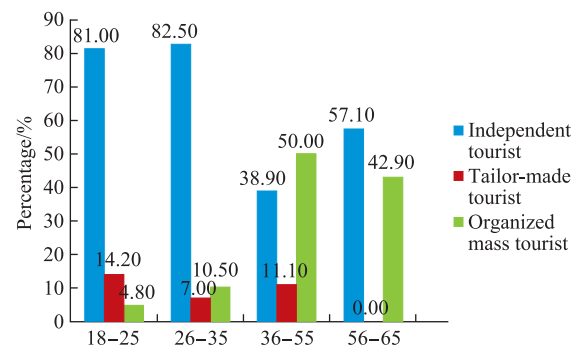


Figure 1 Travel preferences by age groups

The findings of this study show that group travel increases with older age in Figure 1; however, after 55 years a slight decrease can be seen; 57.1% of older tourists choose to travel alone. According to one news report^[24], since 2014, increasing numbers of Chinese people choose to travel independently, including older tourists.

4.2 Multiple channels for gathering information

Rovaniemi evokes strong images among Chinese tourists: the Arctic Circle, Santa Claus, northern lights, and the midnight sun. In 2003, the majority of Chinese people reported having heard about Santa Claus, but very few respondents knew that Santa Claus was said to originate from Rovaniemi^[20]. In 2016, 83.5% of respondents stated that they knew Rovaniemi to be the official hometown of Santa Claus (Figure 2). However, the most common image associated with Rovaniemi is not Santa Claus but the Arctic Circle.

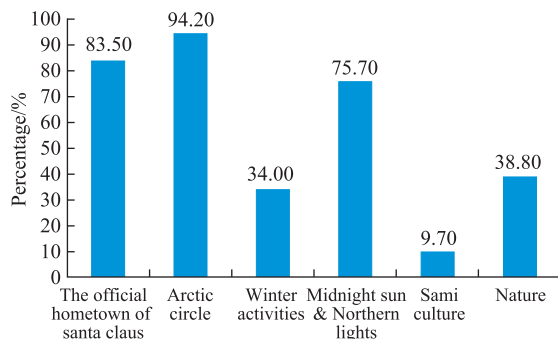


Figure 2 What do you know about Rovaniemi? (Multiple answers allowed)

Information about Rovaniemi is actively searched by the majority of Chinese tourists (67.96%, Figure 3). In comparison to Western cultures, Eastern cultures tended to have plans in detail or partially have plans^[37]. Reynolds^[38] noted that the formation process of the mental image of a destination relies on several impressions selected from a flood information about the destination. Such information is derived from various sources, including promotional literature (travel brochures, posters), public opinion (family/friends, travel agents), and the mass media (newspapers, magazines, television, books, movies).

According to the China Internet Network Information Centre^[39], that there are currently 564 million “netizens”, and this number is increasing. In a recent longitudinal study, Kristensen^[25] stated that Chinese independent tourists are well acquainted with social media, although the format of engagement tends to vary at different trip stages (e.g., pre-trip, onsite travel, and reflection stages). In common with other tourism markets, blogs, virtual communities, micro-blogs, reviews, websites, and other forms of online community have become an important information source for both travel planning and reflection^[35,40].

Because of the increasing availability of information through various channels, in a 2016 survey, Chinese tourists showed a better understanding compared with previous

years of the rich tourism resources in Nordic countries. In addition to independent research by tourists themselves, word of mouth, which has genuine authority in Chinese culture, influenced travelers^[23].

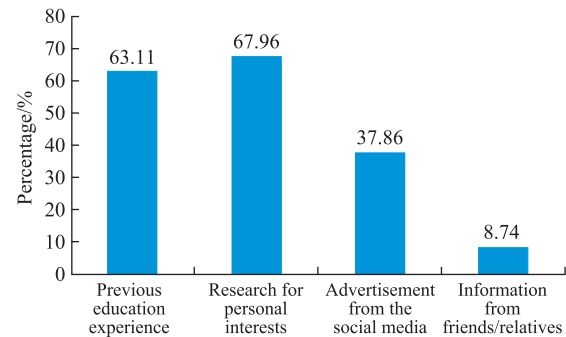


Figure 3 Where did you learn about Rovaniemi? (Multiple answers allowed)

4.3 Travel attractions for Chinese tourists

Our results indicate that Chinese tourists are most attracted to beautiful natural landscapes, as stated by nearly all respondents (96.10%, Figure 4). However, 40.8% of respondents reported that they were interested in “winter activities”. This means that Chinese tourists are not only taking pictures of scenic spots, but they also demand a deeper tourism experience. Among the respondents, 20.4% reported wanting to visit as many places as possible, and Chinese tourists prefer tours that will take them to multiple countries when considering the price and the duration of a trip. Because of the short flying time and convenience of the Schengen visa, Finland is the gateway for Chinese travelers to Europe.

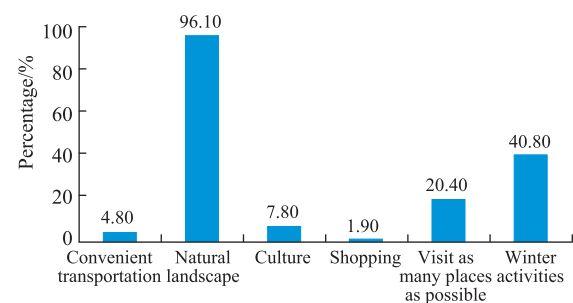


Figure 4 Travel attractions for Chinese tourists to Rovaniemi (Multiple answers allowed)

According to the research results, Chinese tourists selected “culture”, “taking the chance to visit as many places as possible”, and “convenient transportation” as secondary attractions. Winter activities are not only appealing for young people; tourists in every age group reported a desire to participate exciting activities during their holidays (Figure 5).

4.4 Activities of Chinese tourists in Rovaniemi

All respondents chose “visit scenic spots” as a must-

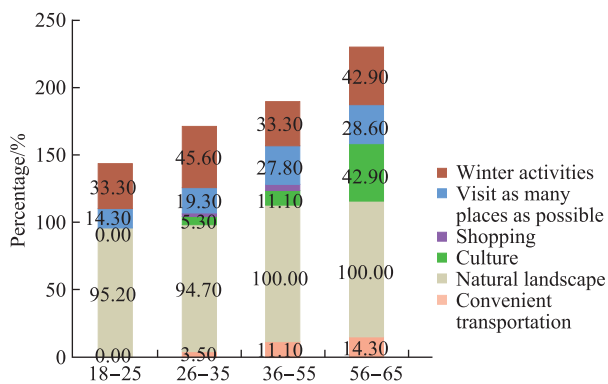


Figure 5 Travel attractions by age groups

do activity when visiting Finland. Because recognizing characteristics of *mingsheng* (scenic spots) and identifying some cultural references associated with *mingsheng* is a part of a shared cultural grammar in China. And good tourists are those who learn the canonical representations of the sites they plan to visit^[41]. The desire to travel could indicate a desire to validate one’s knowledge of canonical representations. This applies to a large part of Chinese society (Table 3). Besides, more than half of the respondents reported attending sports/leisure activities (such as skiing, skating, motor-sledding, or dog-sledding). The year 2003 marked a major difference in that the majority of the respondents (93.5%) did not report participating in any winter activities^[20]. Approximately half of the respondents also chose “taste food” and 23.21% selected “shopping” as activities during the Rovaniemi visit.

On average, females and respondents aged below 25 years or over 56 years were more likely to purchase souvenirs (Figures 6–7). Similarly, females, and respondents aged below 35 or over 56 were more willing to taste local foods.

Table 3 Activities while in Rovaniemi

What do you want to do when in Rovaniemi? (multiple answers)	Percentage in 2016	Percentage in 2003 ^[20]
Visit scenic spots	100%	–
Taste food	50.49%	–
Shopping	23.21%	35.8%
Sports/Leisure activities	54.4%	6.5%
	N=103	N=123

4.5 Reasons to recommend a visit to Rovaniemi and Finland

Kim et al^[42] found that potential Chinese outbound tourists taking leisure trips are likely to prefer destinations with good scenery and safety to more economically developed destinations with good shopping opportunities when selecting overseas tourism destinations.

In a 2003 study, almost half (48%) of the sample clearly stated that they would not recommend Finland to their friends or relatives as a tourism destination. Among the reasons for not recommending, “nothing to see” (13.8%) was the most frequently mentioned reason; “Nothing special” (10.6%)

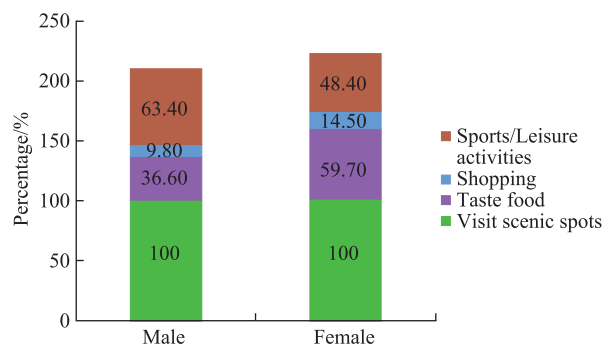


Figure 6 Activities by gender

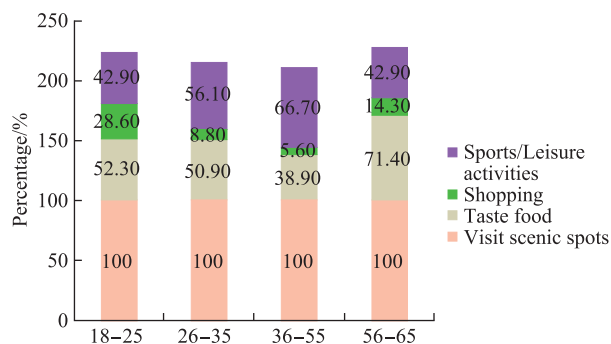


Figure 7 Activities by age groups

was the second, followed by “too high price level” (5.7%), “no information in Chinese” (4.9%), and “too cold” (4.1%). Whereas a 2016 survey, only one respondent reported not wanting to recommend Finland because of its cold climate, the other interviewees found that there are many reasons to recommend Rovaniemi, including the unspoiled environment, the close relationship of the people with nature, and the beautiful scenery. Many respondents used expressions such as “dreamlike” and “mystical” to describe Rovaniemi as “a land of idyllic beauty” and “a land of peace”. Some respondents mentioned it is worth visiting for the distinctive northern landscape, the northern lights, and “Santa Claus”. Others suggested Rovaniemi is suitable for all age groups because it is a safe place. It is important to note that the majority of the Eastern tourists prefer to be with their families, which is an essential component of the Eastern collectivist cultures^[43, 37]. Various interesting experiences, such as driving in winter, enjoying sauna, and staying at an ice hotel, reportedly made the trip more exciting than expected for many tourists. Respondents also mentioned that they appreciated the short flying time between China and Finland. Three respondents stated it was not as cold as expected and another three declared that they loved Finland.

The main reasons for recommending Rovaniemi in 2016 are summarized in Figure 8.

5 Conclusions

The last two decades have seen a rapid growth of tourism in Polar Regions^[44]. The Arctic has become a very attractive

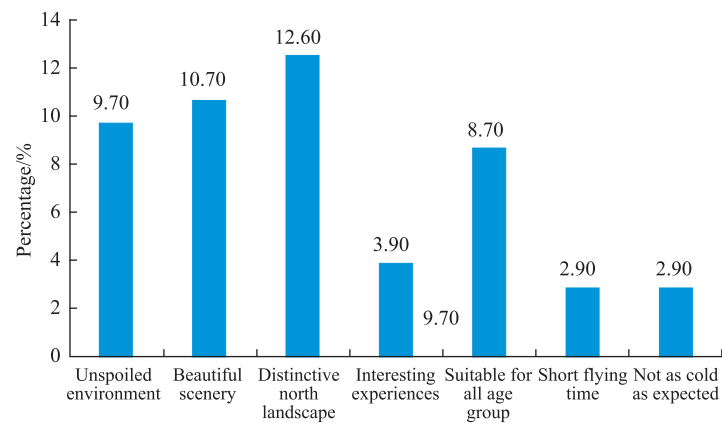


Figure 8 Reasons to recommend Rovaniemi in 2016

destination because of the beauty of its natural environment and the fascination that people feel for northern landscapes, as well as changes in consumer preferences and increasing accessibility to these regions. The image of the Arctic has long been associated with cold, snow and ice; however, the Arctic region has transformed from being considered an inhospitable place to a very attractive destination^[44] and what was considered a drawback has been turned into an appealing advantage^[45-47].

Countless books, articles, films, and television programs have portrayed the “Arctic sublime”^[48]. Increased tourist and general interest in mythicized places such as the Arctic can be partly explained as a postmodern re-enchantment of the world^[49]. The mythical Arctic is a representation that belongs to an active user who participates in person. Today the attraction of the Arctic relates to the physical and mental challenge it represents; the Arctic landscape has become a powerful symbol. This mythology of the Arctic and the north makes the Arctic region highly attractive for tourists motivated by the wish to experience vast, wild, unpolluted, and mysterious landscapes. The growing interest in the Arctic is also associated with concerns about a fragile environment. Another motivation is adventure. Some travelers need to travel further distances, to experience extreme sensations, or to surpass their own previous achievements.

This paper, based on an online survey, sheds light on the characteristics of Chinese tourists visiting an Arctic destination. The questionnaire was addressed to Chinese tourists who had visited Rovaniemi.

The results show a rapid development in the foreign independent tour market. Chinese tourists were motivated by the desire to learn about Finland through authentic experiences and the desire to explore an unfamiliar destination. The data show that perceptions about the north, the Arctic, and Rovaniemi are well established among Chinese people. The most iconic signs, the northern lights, the midnight sun, the Arctic Circle and Santa Claus are well known and considered must-see attractions while in Rovaniemi.

Chinese tourists are increasingly demanding deeper tourism experiences. In the case of Rovaniemi, tourists wish

to enjoy winter activities and sauna in a pure environment, and to have unique experiences, such as sleeping in an ice or glass hotel. Chinese tourists wish to benefit from more travel information, which will allow Chinese tourists to independently devise complete travel plans before a journey.

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Appendice-1

Questionnaire

1. Gender:
 - A. Male B. Female
2. Age Group:
 - A. <18 B. 18-25 C. 26-35 D. 36-55 E. 56-65 F. >66
3. Which part of China are you from? _____
4. Generally, in which way will you travel?
 - A. I plan the journey myself, completely
 - B. Individual travel, plan set by others
 - C. I travel with a group, and never plan my journey by myself
5. Do you have previous outbound tourism experience?
 - A. Traveling abroad for the first time
 - B. Only have been to nearby foreign countries
 - C. Have been to Europe
 - D. Have been to Finland
 - E. Have been to Rovaniemi
6. How many days will you stay in Finland? _____
7. What will you do when you are traveling in Finland? (Multiple answers allowed)
 - A. Visit tour attractions
 - B. Taste food
 - C. Shopping
 - D. Sports/leisure activities
8. Did you buy any souvenirs from Rovaniemi?
 - A. YES, I bought _____ B. NO
9. Are you satisfied with the trip? Please rate your level of satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = Least satisfied; 5 = Most satisfied).
 - A. Sufficient tourism information _____
 - B. Accommodation _____
 - C. Transportation _____
 - D. Entertainment _____
 - E. Service quality _____
 - F. Safety _____
 - G. Locals' friendliness _____
 - H. Food _____
 - I. Cultural experience _____
 - J. Natural landscape _____
 - K. State of environment _____
 - L. Shopping experience _____
10. What was your impression about Rovaniemi before the trip? _____

Where did you get that abovementioned impression? (Multiple answers allowed)

- A. Previous education experience
- B. Research for personal interests
- C. Advertisement in social media
- D. Information from friends/relatives

11. What motivated you to choose Rovaniemi as your destination? (Multiple answers allowed)

- A. Convenient transportation
- B. Natural landscape
- C. Culture
- D. Shopping (Finnish design, high-tech products, souvenirs, and tax refund service)
- E. Want to visit as many countries as possible
- F. Winter activities or sport

12. What were the most important experiences during your journey? _____

13. What do you know about Rovaniemi? (Multiple answers allowed)

- A. The official hometown of Santa Claus
- B. Arctic Circle
- C. Winter activities
- D. Midnight sun & northern lights
- E. Sami culture
- F. Nature

14. What did you not enjoy in this trip? (Multiple answers allowed)

- A. Expensiveness of Rovaniemi
- B. No knowledge about Rovaniemi
- C. No interest; I feel that there is nothing worth seeing
- D. Cold weather and long dark winters
- E. Eager to go to other famous countries instead of Finland (e.g., France or Italy)

15. Would you recommend Rovaniemi and Finland to your friends and/or relatives? Why?
