Chinese Medicine as a product filling the wellness health tourism niche in China: Prospect and challenges

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ABSTRACT: With the boom of China’s economy and an influx of foreign visitors Chinese Medicine and related health services have increasingly become popular for tourists. This study includes a survey to explore the pattern of tourists’ health product and services consumption during their stays in China. The research team also visited a couple of resorts and observed the pattern of health products and services that were offered under the brand name of Chinese Medicine. The vast majority of these tourists was short term visitors and had consumed Chinese herbal medicine, body massage, hot spring baths, foot massage, and spa activities for health rejuvenation and relaxation. This trend has made Chinese Medicine a prime label for promoting various health products and services as wellness tourism. The major reasons for tourists’ consumption of such Chinese Medicine appear to be to reduce stress, relax, reduce pain, and try new things which are not accessible or affordable in their own countries. However, concern has risen about the quality and authenticity of the Chinese Medicine products and services tourists consume. As the data show, very few of the expatriates were aware of the professional background of the service providers and had little knowledge about Chinese Medicine. This paper concludes that Chinese Medicine has been used as a label to cater to tourists, where the prime selling points are Chinese culture, minimum side-effects, and stress reduction. However, this development has also been facing various challenges, such as quality control, lack of regulation and the authenticity of the Chinese Medicine products and services involved.

Keywords: Wellness; tourism; massage; China; Chinese medicine

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, health tourism has increasingly become popular with the rise of consumer capitalism in countries across the Asia-Pacific region. Although the health tourism industry in China is facing a number of challenges, such as scarcity of supply of quality medical and health care, lack of sufficient skilled labor force, an underdeveloped market, lack of networking, limited supply of English speaking health professionals, etc., the use of Chinese Medicine products and services has risen significantly to cater to tourists involved in wellness tourism.

The total number of health tourism companies offering treatments in China are only 2, much fewer than in major destination countries such as India (116), in Singapore (13) and Thailand (37). The number of health tourism companies based in China is just 1, whereas there are 89 in India, 7 in Singapore and 15 in Thailand (Connell, 2011:185-86). A government report suggests that the existing underdeveloped health tourism industry in China is focusing on traditional Chinese Medicine and therapies (Ministry of Health of People’s Republic of China, 2007). In particular, spas and massage centers have become big business in China, which has an ancient tradition of offering massage, bathing, hot springs, herbal medicine and acupuncture (Heung and Kucukusta, 2012).

At the same time, concern has risen about the use of Chinese Medicine as a label to promote various products and services for relaxation and rejuvenation. Such development symbolizes the entry of consumer capitalism into Chinese Medicine, and that tourists have consumed Chinese Medicine products and services without considering their authenticity.

The objectives of this study are to examine how ‘Chinese Medicine products and services’ has been used as a brand name to cater to tourists in China, the pattern of products and services offered under the Chinese Medicine label, and the prospect and challenges this sector encounters. This study examines the process under which Chinese Medicine has become a product filling the wellness health tourism niche in contemporary China. Under this process of examination this study tries to identify the prospect and challenges in developing a wellness tourism niche through promoting Chinese Medicine product and services. These findings would help to overcome the potential challenges wellness health tourism niche encounter in China using Chinese Medicine product and services. At the same time, this will also help developing