

## **CULTURAL MEDIATION IN GUIDED TOUR EXPERIENCES: A CASE STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN GUIDES OF CHINESE TOUR GROUPS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the cultural mediating role of tour guides on Chinese group tours in Australia, which emerged as important for this market. Using a case study, the paper reports on an investigation of views of tourism industry representatives, tour guides and Chinese visitors on cultural mediation. The investigation includes respondents' defined meanings of the role of cultural mediator, and their evaluation of tour guides' performance of this role. Consistent with previous studies, both visitors and tourism industry representatives reported that to be a cultural mediator, a tour guide needs to mediate access, information, and encounters, but their elaborations on what these roles entail provide new insight beyond that which has been previously reported in the literature. The case study also provides empirical evidence that cultural mediation by tour guides facilitates and delivers memorable experiences. The paper concludes with several important implications for the tourism industry for training tour guides.

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# **CULTURAL MEDIATION IN GUIDED TOUR EXPERIENCES: A CASE STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN GUIDES OF CHINESE TOUR GROUPS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Visitors join guided tours for a variety of reasons, but there is increasing evidence that the desire and need for 'cultural mediation' is a central motivator for international visitors who engage the services of a guide (Laws, 1995; Weiler & Ham, 2001). In the case of Asian visitors to Western (developed) countries, for example, the fully escorted group tour is the predominant way of travelling (Wang, Hsieh & Huan, 2000). Members of these group tours depend on their guides to overcome their cultural and language barriers and strike a balance between cultural buffering and exploration. Indeed, all tour groups travelling abroad experience the visited country in a way that is at least partly filtered and structured by their tour leaders or their guides (Pearce, 1982a). The guide may influence not only where tourists go and what they see, but also what aspects of the host culture they are exposed to, how the host culture is translated and presented as well as the group's interaction with host communities and social settings. Thus, as Christie and Mason (2003) observed, good tour guides offer their clients more than a superficial introduction to a new environment, country or culture: they *connect* them with that culture.

Not surprisingly, then, a guide's performance can influence the tourist's experience in fundamental ways (Pearce, 1982b; Arnould & Price, 1993); indeed, what a guide does or does not do can 'make or break' a tour (Schmidt, 1979). Tour guides who are culturally inattentive can compromise an entire travel experience through insensitivity and communication problems (Lopez, 1980). It is also possible for a tour guide to isolate tourists from a destination community (Schmidt, 1979), effectively depriving them of the very connection they came to experience, even though the tourists themselves may be unaware that this is happening. If this type of 'insulated adventure' experience occurs, those tourists in search of something different and exotic may be dissatisfied and the experience may fall short of achieving mutual understanding (Wang, 1999).

The gap between expectation and reality on guided tours was recognised over twenty years ago by Pearce (1982a). He argued that the mediating effect of tour guides on intercultural tourist experiences represented an area in need of research. However, there is still an almost complete absence of research dissecting or analysing the mediating role of tour guides. Of the handful of studies conducted, most are either descriptive in nature or in the category of *a priori* conceptualisation. There is a lack of both theory building and empirical testing with respect to what makes an effective cultural mediator and its impact on the visitor experience (Yu, Weiler & Ham, 2001).

Moreover, the focus has been on the mediating effect of guiding Western tourists in developing countries, with little research examining tour guiding of new visitor segments, for example, outbound tour groups from developing countries such as China. Thus, there is a need for research on the cultural mediation role of tour guides, particularly those who lead tour groups from non-Western countries to tourism destinations in the developed world (Cohen, 2003). It is the goal of this paper to address this gap in the literature.

## **STUDY FOCUS: CHINESE-SPEAKING LOCAL TOUR GUIDES IN AUSTRALIA**

### **Chinese Visitor Travel to Australia**

In 2001, the annual growth rate of Chinese visitor arrivals in Australia was 38 per cent. Similar growth is predicted for at least the next eight years. The latest forecasts from the Australian Tourism Forecasting Council (2002) indicate that the number of Chinese visitors to Australia will reach more than 1.4 million annually by 2012, beyond the growth of any other market.

It is the policy of the Chinese government, however, to organise, plan and control the development of Chinese outbound travel (China National Tourism Administration, 2001). Control is achieved through a number of mechanisms such as single-trip passports, restricting travel options through approved travel agencies and tour operators, and limiting travel to designated destinations. By the year 2002, China had approved 22 destinations for outbound travel<sup>1</sup>. Of these destinations, Australia was the first Western country to be given Approved Destination Status (ADS), which enables Chinese nationals to use ordinary passports when applying for tourist visas for visiting Australia (Tourism Forecasting Council, 1999).

### **Chinese-speaking Local Tour Guides**

Under the ADS scheme, Chinese holidaymakers must join an ADS group tour if they wish to visit Australia. These ADS group tours are fully inclusive, and require a Chinese-speaking local guide for every group. These guides are expected to lead the groups to places of interest, deliver commentary and interpret the attractions of the visited region. They are also expected to mediate interactions between the group and the host as well as control the tour (that is, they are responsible for safety and security as well as the itinerary). As a result, local tour guides looking after Chinese tour groups serve as the main point of contact between the destination and their Chinese clients.

Despite the importance of the tour guide's job for the Chinese market, there have been few published studies on guides of Chinese group tours (Ap & Wong, 2001; Wong, 2001; Zhang & Chow, 2004), and no study of Chinese-speaking local tour guides in Australia. While anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these guides are able to facilitate non-stressful, interesting and satisfying interactions for visitors, some have low levels of English language proficiency and limited knowledge of Australian geography, history and culture. Despite their official status as 'Australian residents', they struggle with cultural fluency in much the same way as their clients, and lack the in-depth knowledge and cultural competencies necessary to facilitate the intercultural experience that their Chinese visitors are seeking. Given the importance of guides as cultural mediators for Chinese visitors to Australia and other ADS countries, an examination of cultural mediation in this context is both timely and important (Yu, Weiler & Ham, 2001).

### **DEFINING THE CULTURAL MEDIATION ROLE OF A GUIDE**

For the purpose of this paper, a cultural mediator can be defined as 'a person who facilitates communication, understanding, and action between persons or groups of different cultures' (Taft, 1981: 53). More specifically, a mediator's task might include 'disseminating information, promoting mutual understanding, forming culturally relativistic attitudes, producing cross-cultural empathy, spreading international goodwill and reconciling disparate cultural practices' (Bochner, 1981:306).

Tour guides work at the interface between the tourist's and the host's culture, and thus assume this cultural mediation role in addition to their many other tasks (Cohen, 1985; Smith, 2001). According to Cohen (1985), the mediating function of a tour guide includes two components: social mediation and cultural brokerage. Social mediation involves acting as a go-between, linking visitors to the local population and to tourist sites and facilities, and making the host environment non-threatening for the tourist. Cultural brokerage, as suggested by Cohen (1985), mainly involves provoking thought and helping tourists connect with the host culture (Tilden, 1977; Ham, 2002). Cultural mediation is considered by Cohen as a primary role of the professional tour guide. It is the second component of the guide's mediatory role and is seen as vital to the quality of tourist experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> The designated destinations were: Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, Nepal, Hong Kong, Macao, Myanmar, South Africa, Turkey, Egypt, Malta and Germany.

A number of published studies (Schmidt, 1979; Holloway, 1981; Pearce, 1982b; Pearce, 1984; Cohen, 1985; Hughes, 1991; Pond, 1993; Gurung, Simmons & Devlin, 1996; Bras, 2000; Ap & Wong, 2001; Smith, 2001; Yu, Weiler & Ham, 2001) have acknowledged the mediating role of tour guides although they have not typically distinguished between the social and cultural mediatory roles (Table 1).

**Table 1: Role of a Tour Guide as a Mediator: Definitions in the literature**

Author & theoretical perspective	Mediating role	Underlying theme
Schmidt (1979) Sociological	Buffer between tourist - and social environment, influence what to see, how to get there, how to deal with locals, removing interaction difficulties	Mediating access and encounters
Holloway (1981) Sociological	Information giver, provision of access, catalyst of group interaction, mediating tourist-host interaction	Mediating access, information and encounters
Pearce (1982b, 1984) Social-psychological	Shape tourist-local contact, acting as catalyst for group solidarity, influence tourists' perception on host community	Mediating information and encounters
Cohen (1985) Sociological	Interpretation (translate the unfamiliar), selection (what tourists can see and what they cannot see), mediating encounters between cultures	Mediating access, information and encounters
Hughes (1991) Psychological	Facilitate communication between cultural groups, provide insights into local way of life, buffer between tour group and the unfamiliar, provide access to non-public places	Mediating access, information and encounters
Weiler et al. (1991) Tourism/tour guiding	Cultural brokering, Interpretation	Mediating information
Pond (1993) Tourism/tour guiding	Inform, create memorable interpretations	Mediating information
Gurung et al. (1996) Tourism/tour guiding	Agent between the visited and visitors, interpret host cultural and natural features, point out points of interest, making strange encounter non-threatening	Mediating information and encounters
Ap & Wong (2001) Tourism/tour guiding	Interpretive aspect of guiding enhance visitors' understanding of the destination	Mediating information
Bras (2000) Anthropological	Brokers as entrepreneurs, turn social relationship and guiding narratives into a profitable business asset	Mediating information & access
Smith (2001) Sociological	Mediating between hosts and guests, cultural interpretation, ethnic imaging, cultural trait selection, decision making	Mediating access, information and encounters
Yu, Weiler & Ham (2001) Intercultural communication Tourism/tour guiding	Facilitate communication, understanding and action between different cultural groups	Mediating information and encounters

These studies suggest that the mediating activities of tour guides can be categorised into at least three aspects: *mediating access*, *mediating information* and *mediating encounters*. Tour guides *mediate access* by determining which part of the local environment, heritage and culture is exposed to tourists and which is hidden. Tour guides are expected to provide tourists with physical access and insight into the host culture without intruding on the private life of local people.

The interpretation function is largely seen as a way of *mediating information*, that is, by conveying the significance of the visited place, tour guides help visitors make intellectual and emotional

connections with the place (Weiler, Johnson & Davis, 1991; Pond, 1993; Gurung, Simmons & Devlin, 1996; Bras, 2000; Ap & Wong, 2001; Smith, 2001, Yu, Weiler & Ham, 2001).

Tour guides also *mediate encounters* between tourists and hosts, between tour group members, and between tourists and staff working for local restaurants, hotels, attractions and so on (Schmidt, 1979, Holloway, 1981; Pearce, 1982a; Hughes, 1991, Smith, 2001). The guide not only acts as a go-between in these encounters but also as a role model of what is appropriate behaviour (Yu, Weiler & Ham, 2001).

The remainder of this paper reports on an investigation of views of tourism industry representatives, tour guides and Chinese visitors regarding cultural mediation. The investigation includes respondents' definition of the cultural mediating role of tour guides, and the role that cultural mediation plays in visitors' most memorable experiences.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This paper is based on a larger empirical study undertaken in two phases: a qualitative phase in late 2001 using semi-structured interviews, followed by a quantitative phase in late 2001--early 2002 using self-completed questionnaires.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty tourism industry representatives. The purpose of the interviews was to uncover perceptions of the informants about the roles that Chinese-speaking tour guides are expected to play. The interview results together with the findings from the review of past studies on roles of guides were used to design an instrument for the phase two surveys. The informants include one inbound tour operator association, one tour guide association, one tourism training institution, five Chinese-speaking tour guides, seven approved ADS Australian inbound tour operators and five approved Chinese travel agencies (wholesalers) headquartered in Beijing. Sampling was purposive and, in the case of the Australian inbound tour operators, a census was attempted.

In the second phase, self-completed questionnaire surveys were employed with local tour guides and Chinese visitors in ADS groups. For the tour guide survey, the researcher distributed approximately 100 questionnaires either in person or by mail, of which 31 completed questionnaires were returned. For the visitor survey, a list of approved ADS Australian tour operators (30) and a list of approved ADS Chinese travel agencies (21) were obtained. A random sample of tour operators was used to distribute questionnaires to Chinese visitors in ADS groups. In order to ensure an adequate sample size, the researcher also obtained permission from two hotels in Melbourne to access respondents; these two hotels accommodate most of the Chinese ADS groups that stay in Melbourne. In total, 495 questionnaires were collected, producing a useable response set of 461.

The use of mixed methods in this study aimed to reduce the limitations inherent in adopting one specific paradigm. However, the methods are not without limitations. First, the size of the population of Chinese-speaking local ADS guides in Australia is not known, and thus in the absence of a sampling frame, a probability sample was not possible. Consequently, the non-random sampling procedures together with the modest number of respondents to the tour guides' survey may have resulted in sampling error (Salant & Dillman, 1994), affecting the generalisability of the findings. However, multiple data sources were used to minimise bias.

Second, the manner in which the visitor data were collected was also constrained by a number of factors. Due to limited access to Chinese ADS tour groups, the visitor survey was mainly conducted in Melbourne, resulting in limited opportunities to triangulate visitor data. Also, assessment of the guided tour experience was based on responses collected just prior to

completion of the tour; therefore, comparisons between pre-tour expectations and post-tour perceptions could not be made.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

The data from phase one consisted of field notes and tape transcripts which were content analysed and classified. In phase two, although the main purpose of conducting the visitor survey and the tour guide survey was to examine tour guides' intercultural competence (see Yu, 2003), certain sections of each questionnaire related to tour guides' roles. Respondents of both the guide survey and visitor survey were asked to rate the relative importance of several roles of tour guides. In addition, visitors were asked to answer three open-ended questions about their most memorable experience during their visit to Australia; what role, if any, their tour guides played in such experience; and any other comments they would like to make.

To analyze how industry representatives and visitors perceive the roles of tour guides, responses to the semi-structured questions in the in-depth interviews and responses to the open-ended questions were translated and transcribed, and inductive data analysis was used to process the data. Statistical analysis was performed to compare how visitors and guides perceive the roles of tour guides.

Several steps were taken to strengthen the validity of the findings. First, the researchers inspected and compared all the data fragments (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) so that the full variation of the issues under investigation could be observed (Perakyla, 1997). Secondly, in an effort to think critically and objectively, the researchers resisted the temptation to jump to easy conclusions (Silverman, 2000:178). Thirdly, data were treated comprehensively to achieve integrated and precise results (Mehan, 1979). For example, the perceptions of roles of tour guides given by the industry representatives were compared with the findings from both the visitor survey and the guide survey, and integrated concepts were identified. Finally, the responses to the open-ended questions were tabulated to identify any strong tendencies (Silverman, 2000). As the following results reveal, the use of multiple data sources and multiple methods of collecting data proved to be valuable and, because the qualitative and quantitative data are in many cases consistent, enhanced the trustworthiness of the research findings.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Perceptions of Tour Guides as Cultural Mediators**

As already mentioned, semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism industry representatives to elicit the most important roles of Chinese-speaking local tour guides. Using content analysis, five main roles (categories) emerged, one of which was 'to be a cultural mediator'. Some respondents noted that, although desirable, the role of cultural mediation is a difficult one for guides.

Subsequently in phase two, the five roles were presented (in a self-completed questionnaire) to both tour guides and visitors, and respondents were asked to rate the relative importance of the roles on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important). Both groups rated cultural mediation as an important role of the guide (mean score of 5.8 for both groups), although all of the other roles (providing good customer service, caring for the health and safety of the group, providing information and managing the group itinerary) were rated somewhat higher in importance by both guides and tourists. It could be argued, however, that there is an element of 'mediation' in each of the other roles.

## Respondents' Defined Meanings of the Role of Cultural Mediation

Results from the interviews with the tourism industry representatives and the visitors' self-completed survey revealed not only the perceived importance of the cultural mediating role of tour guides but also insights into the meanings of this role. Consistent with previous studies, as shown in Table 2, both visitors and tourism industry representatives reported that to be a cultural mediator, a tour guide needs to mediate access, information, and encounters, but their elaborations on what these roles entail provide new insight beyond that which has been previously reported in the literature.

**Table 2: Respondents' Defined Meanings of Cultural Mediating Role**

Cultural Mediating Role	Respondents' Defined Meanings
Mediating access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Not only provide physical access but insights into the local culture</li> <li>▪ Facilitate visitors to observe and experience cultural differences</li> <li>▪ Connect visitors with places visited</li> </ul>
Mediating information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Deepen visitors' understanding of host society, cultural values and lifestyles</li> <li>▪ Provide language interpretation</li> <li>▪ Facilitate two way communication</li> </ul>
Mediating encounters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Help visitors understand and accept local customs</li> <li>▪ Initiate interaction between the locals and visitors</li> <li>▪ Role model appropriate behaviour</li> </ul>

For example, in relation to mediating *access*, some respondents stated that a qualified tour guide should be able to act as a bridge between two cultures and as a people-to-people ambassador. By mediating *access*, tour guides should facilitate not only physical access, but also insights into the local culture, and ultimately, enable visitors to observe and experience cultural differences and connect them with the places visited.

With respect to mediating *information*, both the visitors and the tourism industry respondents perceived that tour guides need to deepen visitors' understanding of the host society, cultural values and lifestyles. They also need to provide language interpretation to facilitate two-way communication.

Regarding mediating *encounters*, industry representatives observed that tour guides need to help visitors understand and accept local customs and to show visitors how to act in a manner that does not run counter to local norms and ways of thinking. For example, the tourism industry representatives assert that some Chinese visitors act contrary to host country norms by smoking in places where smoking is forbidden, by spitting and by talking too loudly. Respondents noted that as cultural mediators, tour guides cannot always instruct their clients about appropriate behaviour, but must communicate the message in inoffensive and indirect ways. Tour guides need to initiate interaction between the locals and visitors.

These findings add to previous discussions of the cultural mediation role, particularly with respect to the need for a *cognitive and affective* dimension for mediating access, for more *depth* in mediating information, and for more tact and *behaviour role modelling* in mediating encounters.

## Respondents' Evaluation of Tour Guides' Role Performance

Visitors were asked to answer three open-ended questions about their most memorable experience during their visit to Australia, what role, if any, their local tour guides played in such experiences and any other comments they would like to make. In terms of actual performance in relation to cultural mediation, findings from these open-ended questions describe the role performance of Chinese-speaking local tour guides in more detail but are consistent with the opinions expressed by tourism industry representatives. 'Good' tour guides were seen to be those who were able to deliver and mediate information in ways that broaden visitors' views and facilitate communication between visitors and locals.

While acknowledging that some Chinese-speaking local tour guides have done well in *mediating information*, both tourism industry representatives and visitors perceive the main weaknesses in the current performance of many Chinese-speaking local tour guides to be inadequate knowledge about Australia resulting in a lack of depth in the information provided. According to tourism industry representatives, many tour guides have limited knowledge of Australia pertaining especially to tourism sites and general knowledge of Australian culture. The visitor survey respondents also acknowledged that the guides' provision of information on Australia's history, geography, culture and economic development and the country's position in the world fell short of their expectations. This reinforces the findings of the in-depth interviews with industry representatives, that depth of knowledge and interpretive communication technique are the areas of cultural mediation most in need of attention.

## Tour Guides' Cultural Mediating Role in Visitors' Most Memorable Experiences

Respondents to the visitor survey were asked to describe their most memorable experiences during their visit to Australia. Two hundred and twenty respondents provided 339 responses to this question. As shown in Table 3, visitors' most memorable experiences were grouped into five main categories and ranked from the highest to the lowest frequency. Respondents expressed that their guided tour provided them with a deeper understanding of Australia including their understanding of Australian people, Australia as a nation and Australia as a tourism destination. The harmonious relationship between the Australian people and their natural environment was also mentioned, as was the way Australia protects wildlife, the way local people obey rules and regulations and the national interest in sport. Thus, respondents generally provided responses that related more closely to the *information* aspect rather than to the *access* or *encounter* elements of mediation.

**Table 3: Most Memorable Experiences**

Most Memorable Experience (Multiple responses)	No. of responses*
Learning about Australia society, cultural values & lifestyles	113
Cities & sites	88
Scenery, nature & climate	67
Friendly people & interaction with locals	24
Others	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>339</b>

\*220 people provided 339 responses to Q19, of which 8 answers are not relevant to the question.

Respondents were also asked to describe what role, if any, their tour guides played in their memorable experiences. The role of cultural mediator was the most frequently mentioned with responses such as: "...furthered our understanding of Chinese & Australian cultures"; "...broadened our views, acted as a link between eastern and Western cultures"; and "...enhanced our understanding and facilitated communication between visitors and the locals" (Yu, 2003:138).

Again the role of *mediating information* was apparent. In short, the visitors' responses provide empirical evidence that cultural mediation by tour guides facilitates and delivers memorable experiences and is a key mechanism by which the guide enhances the experience for this market segment.

## CONCLUSION

This paper concludes with the implications of the research findings for theory and practice together with avenues for further research. In terms of the implications of the research findings, this paper sheds some light on the meaning, the importance and the elements of the cultural mediation role in the context of guiding Chinese ADS groups in Australia. Further study is needed to determine the relevance of these findings to other market segments and tourist types. This paper also provides empirical evidence of the positive impact of the cultural mediating role on Chinese visitors' experiences, and it demonstrates that cultural mediation is an important guiding role of Australian guides of Chinese group tours.

The insights gained from this research also support previous literature that suggests that cultural mediation has three aspects: mediating access, mediating information, and mediating encounters. The fact that cultural mediation is a key role of the guide and a key element of visitors' most memorable experiences provides the basis for recommending recruitment, selection, training and management strategies that aim to improve the level of competence of guides as cultural mediators.

With regard to training, knowledge about Australia, its history, geography, and culture as well as the tourism product, and the level of communication skills needed to interpret such information, were perceived as weaknesses of Australian guides of Chinese group tours. Thus, these areas appear to be important if tour guides are to be effective at *mediating information*. Knowledge and skills in *mediating access* and *encounters* are also clearly important in recruitment, selection and training of guides. Tour guides of Chinese group tours need to be able to engage and connect visitors in a physical but also an intellectual and emotional sense, with the host populations, cultures and environments of the places visited. These are all skills that can be acquired through training.

Training could be both classroom based and on-the-job, and could incorporate both an apprenticeship system and study tours so that new tour guides could observe and learn from experienced guides. Overall, stronger support should be given to tour guides, especially newcomers to guiding, to obtain intercultural training. To facilitate training, adequate funding may need to be allocated to tourism and tour guide associations and tourism training authorities, to improve access to basic entry-level as well as advanced guide training for Chinese-speaking tour guides.

Moreover, good guiding, particularly with respect to the cultural mediation role, is the responsibility of not just individual guides. There appears to be a need for tour operators and the tourism industry to support professional development, on-the-job training, better remuneration and rewards for good practice for Australian-based Chinese-speaking tour guides. A formal tour guide certification or licensing system that recognises and rewards quality guiding *including cultural mediation competence* would help to attract and retain skilled Chinese tour guides, and provide more incentives to improve their performance as professional guides in general and as cultural mediators in particular. If excellence in cultural interpretation and mediation is to be achieved, commitment and support from all parties: government, the tourism industry, employers and the guides themselves, is essential.

With respect to avenues for further research, attention might be focused on particular destinations, sites and attractions, and experimental manipulation of tour guiding variables based on the research findings from this study. For example, research might focus on the impact of tour guides'

levels of competence on their effectiveness in mediating access, information, and encounters relating to a particular destination or a site. Another avenue for research is to examine effectiveness in mediating access, information and encounters and how each of these impacts on tourists' cognitive and affective learning and the level of intercultural interaction. Finally, there is considerable scope for extending this area of enquiry beyond guides to other mediators in the tourism industry.

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