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The overseas study tour market is calling for industry-wide quality assurance

What significantly distinguishes overseas study tours from ordinary outbound travel in China is its rather complicated network of players from multiple industries and business sectors. Tour operators and travel agents, who typically organize all types of trips, only take up around 15% market share in the Chinese overseas study tour market¹. Instead, leading elementary and middle schools in different regions, as well as overseas study agencies and specialized study tour organizers are all playing active roles in this market segment.

Partly due to inadequate recognition of the field and the wider complications involved, the first governmental guidance on organizing study tours only came in 2016. In that year, China's Ministry of Education partnered with ten other governmental ministries to launch the "Opinions on Promoting Research and Study Travels among Elementary and Middle School Students" program, officially recognizing the importance of integrating study tours into school curriculums. The document also indicated the Chinese government's plans to regulate funding, organization and safety in the market.

The following year, the then called CNTA (China National Tourism Administration) accordingly issued the "Service Specifications in Research and Study Travel", providing further clarification into how the Chinese travel industry should ensure the safety of study tour participants. China's Ministry of Education followed suit in 2017, publishing additional information regarding market regulation. These official rulings are interpreted by market commentators as a signal of the Chinese government's continuous endorsement in this area, which is crucial for any emerging themed travel to gain wider recognition among potential customers in China.

Despite the fact that the market for overseas study tours has gained significant traction and increased over the past 10 years, there is still a lack of agreed industry standards and codes of conduct that are recognizable to the travel industry and consumers. "The current market of overseas study tours is actually quite chaotic", remarked Ms. Huiqin Li, the General Manager of Liaoning Meicheng International Travel Service co. LTD. (Meicheng). "Without industry-wide standards, there is a low barrier for entry. Literally any organization or individual can start a business in organizing overseas study tours, which consequently confuses customers and results in low reliability in product quality."

However, overseas study tours are certainly not any ordinary type of trip where Chinese consumers can safely exclude professional organizers and simply travel instead as FITs (fully individual travelers). Firstly, most participants in such tours are underaged students and their trips notably require the involvement of qualified organizers. More importantly, Ms. Li highlighted that "some learning activities such as class simulation in a foreign country or team building at educational camps enable study tour participants to genuinely learn during play." Last but not least, traveling in groups with other students of a similar age provides an excellent environment for more intensified social interactions. This is notably something that Chinese children miss out on at home due to China's family policy (1979 and 2015), which saw many families were limited to only having one child in order to curb an anticipated over-growth of the country's population.

So, what can be done to improve the service quality of overseas study tours? Some initiatives have been put forward in order to tackle these issues. Ms. Li explained that many major travel companies, including Meicheng China International Travel Service, have restructured in order to accommodate specialized departments for overseas study tours, focusing on managing overseas suppliers, product development, service quality and safety. Others, such as Ctrip, China's largest OTA (online travel agency) have launched their own set of service standards in this area, though there is currently no sign that these could take off to become industry-wide measures. The market has also seen cross-industry collaborations between leading travel brands (Caissa Tourism Group) and education brands (Lanxum, in Chinese "立思辰") among the most recent efforts to reshuffle the market.

Classroom learning during study tours: a sought-after experience

¹ "The Consulting Report of In-depth Research and Strategic Investment in the Study Travel Industry in China: 2019-2025", 2018, Intelligence Research Group

Classroom learning is considered by overseas study tour organizers and participants to be the jewel in the crown of these trips. In clarifying as to why such experience is valuable, Ms. Li commented that many Chinese parents and educators are highly critical of China's own overly exam-focused education system and its pedagogical methods. "Therefore, Chinese (study tour) participants wish to experience how knowledge is taught and learnt during classes through participation in classroom learning and Q&A (questions and answers) sessions in an overseas school." She continued, "rather than just tick this item (classroom learning) off from the list during their trips, we believe opportunities in immersion in foreign languages and cultures, as well as the exposure to different values are the worthiest to obtain during such trips."

However, Ms. Li also pointed out the difficulty in establishing such connections with suitable overseas schools in terms of product development. Ordinary public schools, which are regarded as offering the most authentic and "natural" classroom experience, are administratively not often able to cater for commercial visits. In particular, most of such visits only last between a few days to several weeks and not all participants are necessarily equipped with adequate language abilities. Thus, Chinese tour operators in this field often seek cooperation with private schools and institutions that are more flexible in meeting these needs.

Not ordinary destinations

The majority of mainstream overseas study destinations is concentrated on developed, English-speaking countries and regions that offer advancement in tertiary studies and research. For many Chinese families, undertaking overseas educational tours brings their children one step forward in making the decision as to whether their children will study abroad in the future. Accordingly, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and many leading European countries are among most desired destinations for study tours.

Nevertheless, Ms. Li anticipated that some developing countries and regions will see strong growth in the near future, on account of the fact that they often offer novelty in learning. While the view that the country needs to catch up with more advanced economies has dominated Chinese society for decades, the undisputable fact that China has become the world's second largest economy and is performing an increasingly important global role is also impacting destination choices for study tours. Benefitting from strong economic ties, yet still being regarded as "mysterious", Ms. Li commented that "the Middle East and even Africa are becoming more attractive to China's overseas study customers." "Based on last year's 30% YoY (year-on-year) growth compared to the year before" she furthered "we expect Meicheng will double its sales in overseas study tour in three years."