

THE LEADING COMMUNITY OF CHINA'S TOP TRAVEL BUYERS

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Leveraging and exploring established models' applicability for China's study tourism

What sets more expensive study tours apart from their cheaper counterparts, according to Mr. Zhao Yao, the Director of Ctrip's Study Tour platform, is not only their educational content, but also personnel and travel arrangements. This means that overseas study tourism products that offer unique and more focused learning experiences can appeal greatly to parents who are willing to pay more.

However, does this mean that Chinese study tour organizers should nevertheless add more classroom learning to such trips, even if they take place in the United States, Australia or in other overseas destinations?

Based upon Ctrip's experience, Mr. Yao discussed a number of alternatives. Beyond developing tours in a school and classroom setting as well as integrating cultural elements, Ctrip's Study Tour promotes summer/winter camps that have "well established models and long histories". Mr. Yao pointed out that "summer (and winter) camps in North America and some European countries have existed for more than a hundred years. Therefore, there are established models and industry standards in how to run these camps, representing a holistic educational approach that many Chinese believe to be lacking in their own pedagogical methods."

Mr. Yao highlighted that well-presented study tours should also provide opportunities for Chinese visitors to explore and participate in activities that reflect humanist and universal values. He offered examples of participation in charitable activities, volunteer work, wildlife protection and several projects in less-developed regions, such as parts of Africa and Asia – elements that have long been popular among young people and student groups from many Western countries. Chinese participants who engage in such opportunities have a greater chance to not only develop stronger willpower and achieve self-fulfillment, but also, pragmatically, to help build up their resume.

Products that can successfully integrate such elements, according to Mr. Yao, can cost as much as RMB 48,000 (c.a. USD 7,250). These could, for example, involve a two week tour the United Kingdom or the United States.

Responding to what Chinese customers demand: Quantifiability and standardization

While it may appear to be a somewhat utilitarian approach, Mr. Yao deemed that many Chinese parents regard study tours and summer/winter camps to be an educational investment in their children. Accordingly, the need to be able to offer customers measurable returns on their investment is unavoidable, he furthered; parents will want to see evidence of clear and substantial academic value.

Mr. Yao's view that the field lacks suitable industry-wide standards resonated with those of other industry experts interviewed by ITB China, many of whom commented that Chinese customers are demanding further standardization in products and services in the field of study tourism. However,

due to the complex nature of overseas study tours, there are many fragmented elements that can be difficult to standardize. Furthermore, given its relatively short history and relative underdevelopment, the industry is limited in its R&D and service provision. Finally, a deficiency of suppliers further exacerbates issues on the supply side and has consequently caused confusion among parents looking to choose between various study tour products.

Notably, from the demand side, Mr. Yao identified two prominent approaches to decision-making among study tour customers. The first type includes those who do not have a deep knowledge of study tours or educational camps in the market – a situation that the majority of consumers find themselves in. Instead of doing more research by themselves, they rely on the recommendations of teachers at their children’s schools as well as those from other training organizations. This group are also typically “followers” of social media influencers in the education category and can often make purchase decisions under influence of those they follow.

“The second type of parents, on the other hand, conduct more research into different types of study tour products”, Mr. Yao commented. “They treat projects offered by educational camps as extended learning for their kids and make decisions based on their children’s own abilities and demands. They often care less about the destination but tend to focus instead on what students can gain from participation.”

“Early mow, early sow”: More younger study tourism participants to go overseas

Mr. Yao predicted that the average age of Chinese overseas study tour participants will decrease as an increased proportion of younger participants begin to embark on their first trips while still in primary school. In addition, he also anticipated an increase family traveling together as part of study tour groups.

With regards to potential changes in destination popularity, Mr. Yao believed that those that are currently popular and enjoy strong links with Chinese overseas study will remain successful. However, the growth in travel to Southeast Asia, Africa and other parts of Europe will be more significant than that seen in “traditional” destinations.

In 2018, Ctrip Study Tour has uploaded more than 500 products onto its platform and served almost 10,000 customers. In the coming three years, Ctrip Study Tour is expected to reach 50% annual growth, while the overall study tour market from China will increase by 30-40% each year.