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The Sound of a Destination: soundscape perception and its influence on tourist satisfaction

Aili LIU¹, Xuan Lorna WANG², Fucheng LIU¹, Zhiyong Deng³

(1 College of Resource Environment and Tourism, Capital Normal University, Beijing, 100048;

2 The London School of Hospitality and Tourism, University of West London, London, W5 5RF;

3 College of Music, Capital Normal University, Beijing, 100048)

Abstract

Soundscape, as an integral part of tourism destination, could affect tourist experience. However, understanding of the relationship between soundscape, broadly defined as ‘accommodating the complete sound environment in a location and the human response to it’ (Davis, *et al.*, 2013:224), and tourists remains to be limited.

This paper aims to address this neglected area of tourism study by developing a conceptual framework for evaluating soundscape perception influence on tourist satisfaction. It first identifies the influential factors and key components of tourists’ soundscape perception and then evaluates the factors that affect tourists’ satisfaction. A theoretical framework is subsequently developed to establish the link between the soundscape perceptions of a tourism destination and tourist satisfaction.

A typical case, Hongcun, an ancient village that became UNESCO world heritage site in 2000, located in the tranquil countryside setting of Anhui Province in China was chosen to conduct the empirical study through self-administrated questionnaire. 240 questionnaires were distributed in September 2014 and have yielded 228 valid responses giving a 95% response rate. The results derived from relativity analysis and regression analysis suggest four significant findings. First, regarding soundscape perception, tourists generally agree that sound is an important element of a destination’s landscape. Second, the results show that a tourist’s soundscape perception involves a range of factors including: soundscape importance perception, soundscape quietness perception, identification of expected sounds, perceived sounds and regional representative sounds, and the conformance of soundscape with visual landscape, cultural atmosphere and tourist experience. Third, when evaluating soundscape, these factors could directly or indirectly affect soundscape satisfaction and consequently tourist satisfaction. Fourth, the empirical study of Hongcun validates the long held assumption that improving and optimising a destination’s soundscape could increase tourist’s satisfaction.

The findings of this study contribute to tourism management literature by addressing the importance of soundscape and how soundscape perception could influence tourist satisfaction. We argue that effective management of soundscape is as important as managing a destination’s visual image. This is because soundscape could enhance a destination’s image and possibly define a sense of place.