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Exploring Chinese Tourism in U.S. National Parks: A case study in West Yellowstone

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Report on 2016 Small Grant Award
“Exploring Chinese Tourism in U.S. National Parks: A case study in West Yellowstone”
Jennifer Thomsen, University of Montana

In Spring 2016, I was awarded a Small Grant award of \$5,000 to pursue an exploratory study on Chinese tourism in West Yellowstone, a gateway community to Yellowstone National Park (YNP). The study was developed in partnership with the National Park Service staff and the tourism planners of West Yellowstone in response to the large influx of Chinese tourists to YNP and the gateway communities over the past five years. While there are many opportunities of this increased international tourism such as greater spending during visits and increased tourism in the shoulder seasons, there have also been many challenges for park managers and tourism operators. Some of these challenges include barriers in communication, vehicle safety, human-wildlife conflicts, behaviors around thermal areas, differing expectations of their national park experience, and lack of preparation and understanding for cultural differences in the hospitality industry. To address these challenges and to inform development of visitor experiences and interpretive programs and materials to meet the needs of Chinese tourists, YNP management, and gateway communities, this research aims to: 1) gain a better understanding of Chinese tourists’ attitudes towards national parks, wildlife, and wildlife management; 2) expectations and satisfaction of YNP national park and gateway community experiences; 3) identify the desired communication and interpretation strategies to communicate YNP information, rules, and management.

Since being awarded the grant, I was able to work with partners to design an interview guide for Chinese tourists and local business operators in West Yellowstone. During this trip, we conducted over fifty interviews with Chinese tourists, tourism operators, and local business owners. We are also able to target three specific types of Chinese tourists: 1) large tour bus, 2) small group with guide, and 3) independent traveler. For the Chinese tourists, questions were asked pertaining to their travel planning, motivations for coming to YNP, satisfaction with amenities in West Yellowstone, understanding of management rules and safety issues in YNP, and preferences for travel communication and information before and during their stay including social media sites like Facebook and WeChat. For the tourism operators and the local business owners, questions were asked pertaining to shifts in travel trends to the park and community;

challenges and opportunities of international tourists, strategies to overcome these challenges, and additional information that would be helpful to their business serving international travelers.

After the data was collected, the interviews were to translate from Mandarin to English and transcribed into text that could be analyzed and coded for themes using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Because this requires two steps of translation and transcription, the process took several months to complete for the entire set of interviews. This past spring, all interviews were translated, transcribed, and uploaded into the software system. In the summer, I completed the analysis process of coding each interview and question to search for major themes and trends across the tourist and business owner data.

The Small grant funds were used to design the study, hire data collection staff, conduct data collection in West Yellowstone, transcription services, and helped offset some travel costs to participate in a couple local meetings and a national meeting of the George Wright Society in Virginia this April where I gave an oral presentation on the findings from this study to a group of National Park Service professionals and academics from universities across the country. The funds also allowed me to leverage funds to present the findings at the Montana Governor's Conference on Tourism and Recreation this March in Helena and to design a workshop for staff on Chinese Tourism in 2017 at Yellowstone National Park. I am very appreciative that I was awarded the Small grant as it has allowed me to conduct the pilot study research that directly informs tourism and park professionals in our region and present these findings to a broader audience at a national conference. I am planning to work on a publication for the study in a peer-reviewed academic journal this year.