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Cross-cultural Differences and Cultural Stereotypes in Tourism - Chinese Tourists in Thailand

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Abstract

Stereotypes exit everywhere, and there is no exception in tourism. Thailand has been one of the most popular places for Chinese tourists, and thanks to Chinese visitors, tourism in Thailand has become the single biggest source of growth in the Thai economy. The tourism industry in Thailand is also faced with an increasing number of travelers from all over the world, with different cultural backgrounds as well. As a result, greater cross-cultural awareness, understanding and acceptance of cultural differences is needed in tourism industry. This paper mainly explores the cultural differences between Thai people and Chinese tourists in a tourism context, and examines some stereotypes of Chinese tourists held by Thai people. As stereotypes range from highly favorable to highly unfavorable, this paper focuses on some negative perceptions Thai people hold toward Chinese tourists and discusses the negative effects of stereotyping in cultural understanding and some suggestions to reduce stereotypes in cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Cultural differences; Stereotypes; Tourism

Introduction

Tourism is a major economic factor in the Kingdom of Thailand. Estimates of tourism receipts directly contributing to the Thai GDP of 12 trillion baht range from 9 percent (one trillion baht) (2013) to 17.7 percent (2.53 trillion baht) in 2016 [1]. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) officials said their revenue estimates, for foreign and domestic tourists combined, show that tourism revenue for all of 2017 may surpass earlier forecasts of 2.77 trillion baht (US$78.5 billion) (Voice of America, Retrieved 1 February, 2017). According to a report from the United Nations World Tourism Organization, China is now the top source of international tourism expenditure. For decades, Thailand, the Land of Smiles, has always been considered to be one of the most popular tourist destinations for Chinese. In 2014, 4.6 million Chinese visitors travelled to Thailand (Department of Tourism, Retrieved 10 March, 2015; The Nation, Retrieved 5 July, 2015). In 2015, Chinese tourists numbered 7.9 million or 27 percent of all international tourist arrivals, 29.8 million; 8.75 million Chinese tourists visited Thailand in 2016 [2]. According to TAT, the number of Chinese tourists rose by 93 percent in the first quarter of 2013, an increase that was attributed to the popularity of the Chinese film Lost in Thailand that was filmed in the northern province of Chiang Mai. Currently Chinese visitors account for 30 percent of all foreign travelers to Thailand. "We can see Chinese tour groups all over the country (Thailand), and Union Pay is now widely used anywhere here to cater to Chinese customers" said Yang Chun, a young scholar who studies E-tourism in Thailand for her doctor degree.

The following is the report of the top ten arrivals by nationality in the recent years, which shows Chinese tourists far outpace those from other countries Table 1.

From the figures in Table 1 we can see that the tourism industry in Thailand is now faced with an increasing number of travelers from different countries, with China ranking first. As the number of Chinese tourists (tour groups and self-service travellers) visiting Thailand has been rising, various problems arise as well. Some Chinese tourists fail to obey local laws and regulations, and their behavior violates Thai customs and habits. Their individual behavior was exaggerated and reinforced by certain mass media, newspapers, television, internet in Thailand, which made it easy for ordinary Thai people to conclude that

all Chinese people have the same traits. Their perceptions affect their attitude towards Chinese tourists and all Chinese people as a whole. They have actually some unfair misjudgment about Chinese people and therefore show prejudice against them. Psychologists Plotnik and Mollenauer clearly illustrate the damaging effect of prejudice and its link to stereotyping: "Prejudice refers to an unfair, biased, or intolerant attitude towards another group of people" (1986:565). The prejudice is expressed in a variety of ways, sometimes subtle and on other occasions overt. As stereotypes range from highly favorable to highly unfavorable, this paper focuses on some negative perceptions Thai people hold toward Chinese tourists and discusses the negative effects of stereotyping in cultural understanding and some suggestions to reduce stereotypes in cross-cultural communication.

Literature Review

Stereotyping is assuming that a person has certain qualities (good or bad) just because the person is a member of a specific group [3]. Stereotypes fail to specify individual characteristics. They assume that all members of a group have exactly the same traits. Stereotyping is often based on faulty information. It often leads to serious misunderstandings. Creating stereotypes is a natural human coping mechanism for making sense of our social environment. The reason for the pervasive nature of stereotypes is that human beings have a psychological need to categorize and classify [4]. Saville-Toike states that "social 'typing' or categorization is probably a necessary part of our procedures for coping with the outside world...; [it] should thereby be seen as a potentially positive and in any case inevitable process". The term stereotype initially referred to a printing stamp which was used to make multiple copies

Rank	Country or territory	Jan-Mar2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011
1	China	2,439,076	8,757,466	7,934,791	4,636,298	4,637,335	2,786,860	1,721,247
2	Malaysia	813,865	3,533,826	3,423,397	2,613,418	3,041,097	2,554,397	2,500,280
3	Russia	488,987	1,089,992	884,085	1,606,430	1,746,565	1,316,564	1,054,187
4	South Korea	463,278	1,464,218	1,372,995	1,122,566	1,295,342	1,263,619	1,156,283
5	Japan	408,264	1,439,629	1,381,690	1,267,886	1,586,425	1,373,716	1,277,893
6	Laos	366,376	1,409,456	1,233,138	1,053,983	976,639	975,999	891,950
7	India	304,479	1,193,822	1,069,149	932,603	1,050,889	1,013,308	914,971
8	Germany	283,274	835,506	760,604	715,240	737,658	682,419	619,133
9	United States	283,240	974,632	867,520	763,520	823,486	768,638	681,748
10	United Kingdom	269,995	1,003,386	946,919	907,877	905,024	873,053	844,972

Source: Adapted from "Visitor Statistics, 1998-2016", *Department of Tourism Thailand,* Retrieved 10 January, 2017.

Table 1: Top 10 arrivals by nationality.

from a single model or mold, but Walter Lippmann adopted this term to describe the way society set about categorizing people---"stamping" human beings with a set of characteristics [5]. In his work, Lippmann identified four aspects of stereotypes: simple---certainly more simple than reality, but also often capable of being summarized in only two to three sentences; acquired secondhand---people acquire stereotypes from cultural mediators rather than from their own direct experience with the groups being stereotyped; erroneous---stereotypes are attempts to claim that each individual human being in a certain group shares a set of common qualities; resistant to change: old stereotypes stubbornly color our perceptions [6].

Often people do not spend the time (or do not have either the need or the opportunity) or the emotional and cognitive energy to learn about variation within cultures we perceive to be different from ours. Rather, we use superficially noticeable events to make judgments, even based on one isolated incident, about the characteristics of an entire social group and to determine otherness [7]. Our prejudice influences the personal contacts and experiences we have with members of other cultures so that when we observe behavior that contradicts our expectations, we might explain away the reason for the non-correspondence as "the exception that proves the rule" [7].

Stereotypes impede cross-cultural communication in various ways. They keep us from being successful as communicators because they are oversimplified, overgeneralized, and exaggerated; they tend to impede cross-cultural communication in that they repeat and reinforce beliefs until they often become taken for "truth". Stereotyping can also be defined as gross simplification that prevents a more profound understanding of others as individuals and as members of social groups, and it prevents our dealing effectively with members of other groups. Negative effects of stereotypes occur when we use them to interpret behavior. Some people say stereotypes are an extreme example of cross-cultural miscommunication. They are probably the most difficult stumbling block to overcome in cross-cultural communication.

Methodology

Method

This study aims to explore the particular stereotypes that Thai people might hold towards Chinese tourists. We prepared a few questions to investigate how much Thai locals know about Chinese tourists. The questions were as follows: What do you like/dislike about Chinese tourists? What is your impression on Chinese tourists? Write down characteristics of Chinese tourists. Participants were required to answer the questions either in English or Thai. Interestingly, three school employees from Chiang Mai University (CMU) wrote down

their answers in Chinese, as they were learning Chinese as a foreign language. The survey was conducted in Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

Participants

Twenty-eight Thai locals engaged in this survey, among whom there were undergraduates, postgraduates from National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), cab driver, street vendor, restaurant owner in Bangkok, teachers and staff, postgraduates from CMU, some employees in massage store, travel agency, guesthouse and some other service industry. Their ages range from 23 to 47. Of the twenty-eight participants, most of them have had personal contact with Chinese tourists, and some of them got the impression from mass media or someone else's opinions.

Procedures

We mailed our colleague, friends and students working or studying in NIDA or CMU, Thailand, asking them to help us interview some Thai locals about their general impression on Chinese tourists. Participants were informed that they could include all descriptors that they associated with Chinese tourists no matter whether they were positive, neutral or negative. We got all feedback within five days from twenty-eight Thai people. Some wrote sentences, some a few words, and some paragraphs. Our friends and students also sent back a few screenshots from their phone for us to read their dialogues on social websites like QQ (the biggest instant message programme in China), WeChat (a mobile text and social message communicative service) and Facebook. Based on their online communication we were happy to know that participants were interested in the topic and willing to express their views. But some participants were apparently reluctant to report bad things for any of the other groups and this reluctance was not surprising, given the extreme negativity of these emotions. "Are you sure you want the truth?" a PhD scholar asked.

Results and Discussion

Results

Despite the fact that stereotyping is a natural method of classification and despite the fact that stereotyping has some useful functions under certain circumstances, there are a number of reasons that stereotypes hamper cross-cultural communication. Stereotypes fail to specify individual characteristics. They assume that all members of a group have exactly the same traits. The results of the survey are quite interesting: some traits we did not expect were in the answers, such as speaking good English, great purchasing power (greater than westerners), asking nonsense discount, trouble-making and causing car accidents. Some of their descriptions are true; some are not. Some descriptions are even

contradictory—some say Chinese tourists are polite, yet some say rude; some say Chinese are generous, while some others say selfish. Based on this survey it is safe to say that the temptation is so strong to lump an ethnic group together. Yet those who look a little deeper will be puzzled by the seeming contradictions in Chinese tourists. The truth is that they are all right, and they are all wrong in different situations. The following is the results of the interviews of Thai locals' impression on Chinese tourists Table 2.

There are some other answers which are a combination of good things and bad things, not belonging to any one category (positive, negative or neutral). "I felt a bit bad about Chinese people at first because they always ride motorbikes and stop on the main road to find the way, but later I worked for some Chinese as a photographer, it was good experience with me to know the good side of Chinese. They are good and generous and contribute to the local tourism a lot" (a staff member from CMU). "For Chinese tourists, they are here because of Thailand's affordability and its accessibility. But in the view of most Thais Chinese tourists are unkind and lack of communication in English. In spite of the face they may not understand our culture. Well we should tell them whether (?) what they should do or shouldn't in the polite way to maintain our relation" (a receptionist from a four-star hotel). One Thai wrote, "Chinese tourists are very enthusiasm, but too boisterous. They tend to drive fast on the wrong side of the road, and often go against traffic on one-way streets." He also mentioned that "some hotel and guesthouse operators are turning them away because they say Chinese

tourists often rent a room for two, but stay in a group of four or five. They also deplore their tendencies to litter and hang their clothing on the balcony railing." A cab driver from Bangkok said, "I love Chinese tourists and hate them as well." Judging from the above answers, people can easily see some prejudice and bigotry in them.

Discussion

Stereotypes and prejudice as barriers: Thailand is one of those unique places in the world that has been gifted with some of the most amazing tourist attractions and sightseeing adventures we'll ever experience. In addition, this is a location that has a wonderful mix of culture, tradition, and heritage as well as its own collection of historical attractions that will leave a visitor in complete awe. Traveling is not just an economic behavior, but more a cultural one. And cultural communication is often restrained by some basic civilized norms that are recognized throughout the world, such as respecting local laws, regulations and customs. It is true that some Chinese tourists are not very much aware of cultural differences, and even violate rules and regulations when they are travelling in Thailand. The mass media exaggerated and reinforced Chinese tourists' bad behaviour which made it easy for most Thai people to assume that all Chinese tourists had the same traits. In recent years we could feel Thai people's subtle change of attitude towards Chinese tourists, ranging from the in-flight cabin crew's service of Thai Airways to shop assistants' cold shoulder in stores like seven eleven. If people always talk about a member of

Positive
They are good and generous and contribute to the local tourism a lot.
Good for Thai economy (8)
Well-educated, great, Ok
Chinese people take up 70% of all the foreign tourists. The more Chinese tourist come, the more job opportunities we have.
speaking good English (young people); polite (young people); nice (3)
For the new generation they speak good English.
Negative
Bad behavior (4); not following traffic rules (4); not respecting the Thai customs (2)
Always asking discount if we don't have any discount they ask for gift even (when) they buy The product just 50 bath
Doing whatever they want; very noisy (9)
Speaking very loudly in public (3); not caring about their manners
Too boisterous (3)
They speak very loudly like they are quarreling with each other and they are easy to get mad.
Hard to please; not satisfied with their tour guides' service
Queue-jumping (3), jaywalking
Some rude, picking up nose, spitting, eating loudly
Disgusting, rude, loud (2), ill-mannered
Taking off shoes in public
Trouble-making and causing car accidents
Selfish (old people)
Taking photos everywhere, even where photos are strictly prohibited
Littering and spitting (2)
Asking nonsense discount
Smoking in non-smoking areas (2)
Bad temper and cursing
Being noisy or messy, ignoring smoking signs, cutting in lines, spitting in public places or disrespecting local customs
Not following the rules which cause misunderstanding
Chinese girls wear shorts when visiting Buddhist temples.
Neutral
It's easy to recognize Chinese tourists on the street by their dressing, looking and behavior.
Chinese like to visit temples, Sunday Market, night bazaar.
Chinese tourists interested in "shopping" more than other tourism attractions
Buying a lot (middle aged and old people)
They like to visit pharmacy.
Buying a lot of Tiger Palm, snake oil and other Thai products (3)
Buying Thai souvenir
Fewer tour groups, more backpackers
Their purchasing power is sorely needed in many countries.
Great purchase power, greater than westerners
The numbers in the table refer to the frequency. In addition, for those which did not quite make sense the author altered a little of the original.

Table 2: Thai locals' description of Chinese tourists.

the target group in negative and stereotypic terms, there is prejudice." Certain people have negative feelings about a given group because they feel that the group is interfering with aspects of their culture with which they have become familiar" [8].

Why is it, that contact with persons from other cultures is often frustrating and fraught with misunderstanding? Sometimes rejection occurs just because the group to which a person belongs is different. And people tend to assume that there are sufficient similarities among people all over the world. We sometimes make negative decisions about other people, and prejudice occurs when we hold negative attitudes toward certain group of people, especially racial and religious groups. Prejudices are formed by highly personal and unreasoned generalization about all or most members of the group [8].

Some Thai people harbor negative feelings about all Chinese people just because they dislike some Chinese tourists' behaviour and they know very little about Chinese culture. For example, speaking loudly in public is really bothering for most Thai people. It seems, however, that Chinese are more tolerant of loud noise in public places such as airport, bus, restaurant, hotel lobby. Nevertheless, the awareness of the group's background does not lessen the dislike of loud speaking. People express their dislike in various ways. When prejudice replaces communication, we see overt and covert avoidance and withdrawal when cross-cultural communication is expected. We observe some "arm's-length" prejudice held by flight attendants, shop assistants, hotel receptionists when they become less communicative, impatient and even rude to Chinese tourists. This form of prejudice is hard to detect since people who engage in it seem so tolerant of outgroup members much of this time. Stereotypes and prejudice are a pernicious stumbling block to cross-cultural communication.

Cultural stereotypes and their damaging effects: Often, communication difficulties arise because people think they know all they need to know about people from different cultures and that further communication is unnecessary. Yet images of them tend to be exaggerated, maybe too good, but often too bad. For example, in most Thai people's view, all Chinese are loud and noisy, which is obviously untrue. To reduce or eliminate the bias or stereotypes, we should first understand the damaging effects of stereotyping and then try to find ways to confront and fight them. The term stereotype is the broader term commonly used to refer to negative or positive judgments made about individuals based on any observable or believed group membership, whereas prejudice refers to the irrational suspicion or hatred of a particular group, race, religion, or sexual orientation. The terms are related in that they both refer to making judgments about the individuals based on group membership [3]. Gustavo Lequerica-Calvo finds that the problem is that "stereotypes are distorted taxonomies: incorrect maps of the sociocultural landscape. Just as a distorted map would cause a traveller to become lost, so do false impressions about people and groups cause individuals and indeed, whole societies to lose their moral compass." Stereotypes are stumbling blocks in cross-cultural communication because they interfere with objective viewing of other people. People tend to evaluate, to approve or disapprove the statements and actions of the other person or group. Instead of trying to comprehend thoughts and feelings from the worldview of the other, we assume our own culture or way of life is the most natural, which prevents the open-mindedness to examine attitudes and behaviors from the other's point of view. They force a simple pattern upon a complex mass and assign a limited number of characteristics to all members of a group, such as the description (All Chinese) "speaking very loudly in public; not caring about their manners; not respecting Thai customs".

Stereotypes are harmful because they impede communication, especially communication between people from different cultures. They cause us to assume that a widely held belief is true when it may not be; Stereotypes also impede communication when they cause us to assume that a widely held belief is true of any one individual; The stereotype can become a "self-fulfilling prophecy" for the person stereotyped; When stereotypes lead us to interpret an individual's behaviour from the perceptual screen of the stereotype they impede communication [3].

Tentative ways to reduce stereotypes: Stereotypes can influence intercultural communication in different ways. According to some studies, people tend to favour hypotheses based on stereotypes even when they have a reason to suspect the validity of the stereotype. Stereotypes are often resistant to change in cross-cultural communication. They often become substitutes for thought and experience. When assumptions and stereotypes influence our attitudes, we may find that making a fair judgment about someone or something is a tough challenge.

In cross-cultural communication we should learn some appropriate ways to address stereotypes and learn how to reduce them. We should first do a mental check to make sure we are not influenced by someone else's prejudice and be very careful of jumping to conclusions based on generalizations or others' opinions. Some ways to reduce or eliminate stereotypes in cross-cultural communication are suggested here:

- Using various ways to search more information about other groups or cultures;

- Being willing to learn more about different cultures, being more tolerant of the customs different from ours;

- Developing an open and flexible attitude to cope with all the problems when facing the uncertainty during the communication;

- Taking a more humble, tentative attitude about the accuracy of our judgments;

- Always remembering that there are more differences within a group than between groups;

- Recognizing that we are all part of many groups, none of which can totally explain or define who we are;

- Focusing on every person as an individual instead of taking a group of people as a whole;

- Taking opportunities to neutralize stereotypes when we hear them.

Knowing less about people of different cultural backgrounds increases one's chances of making stereotypes. Hence learning as much as we can about each other's culture can help us to develop better relationship, to get rid of misunderstandings, and to eliminate stereotypes or prejudice created by the lack of realistic information about each other. The appropriate attitude towards different cultures should be respect, understanding and tolerance. Although it is easy to fall into the habit of using stereotypes to prejudge people, there are ways to reduce stereotypes and combat prejudice. What we stress most is to check our own thinking, to be careful of jumping to conclusions based on generalizations or others' opinions and to politely challenge stereotypes when we hear them by offering evidence that the stereotype is false.

Conclusion

Due to short flight, easy visas, beautiful beaches, Chinese tourists are still crowding into Thailand, which becomes Thailand's largest tourism market, and the number of Chinese tourists is optimistically growing [9]. In such a place as Thailand where people from different cultures like to go for their vacation there are inevitably many differences, including belief systems, values, customs, religion, sexual orientation, physical appearance, skin color and so on. Anyplace where differences are found leaves room for stereotypes. Stereotypes are generalizations about people usually based on inaccurate information or assumptions rather than facts. Stereotypes do not take into account the great diversity of people within a group of people. Nor do stereotypes consider the present circumstances of the individual. Even worse, stereotypes can lead to prejudicial or discriminatory behaviour.

As for us Chinese, we should improve our behaviour to keep our image. For years, we've been chanting that "an opening-up China is warming up to embracing the world." However, there is one prerequisite to such an embrace — the Chinese should first abide by a code of conduct in accordance with international practice and behave in a civilized way. To develop and finally achieve cross-cultural communication competence, we should always be aware of such stumbling blocks as stereotype, prejudice and ethnocentrism. We may learn to suspect, or at least keep in check, the cultural perspective that is unique to our own experiences. We may learn to expect more cultural differences, using an investigative approach rather than stereotypes and preconceptions, gradually exposing ourselves to differences so that they become less threatening. As Roger Harrison, a communication expert has pointed out:

The communicator cannot stop at knowing that the people he is working with have different customs, goals, and thought patterns from his own. He must be able to feel his way into intimate contact with these alien values, attitudes, and feelings. He must be able to work with them and within them, neither losing his own values in the confrontation nor protecting himself behind a wall of intellectual detachment (Adapted from L.M. Barna, "Stumbling Block in Intercultural Communication") [10].

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