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Factors Affecting the Service Quality of the Tour Guiding Profession in Macau *

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the factors affecting the service quality of the tour guiding profession in Macau. In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from the Macau Tourist Guide Association, the Macau Government Tourist Office, and selected practising tour guides to explore the issues from multiple insiders' perspectives. The factors identified were classified into six categories: unhealthy business practices, market domination, immaturity of tourist market, changing tourist behaviour, intense competition between inbound tour operators, and human resource issues. The findings suggest that a number of these problems actually originated from the unhealthy business practices of the tourist-generating country, namely Mainland China in this study. Considering the growing importance of the Chinese outbound tourism market, the study findings will be of significant value to Macau and to other destinations targeting the Chinese market.

Keywords: tour guide, tour guiding profession, service quality, Macau inbound, Mainland China outbound.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism literature has widely recognized that the service quality of the tour guide is a critical factor in achieving tourist satisfaction (Lopez, 1980; Geva & Goldman, 1991; Mossberg, 1995; Ap & Wong, 2001; Wong, 2001; Wang, Hsieh & Huan, 2000; Zhang & Chow, 2004; Black & Weiler, 2005), influencing travel operator's reputation and word-of-mouth publicity (Heung, 2008), and affecting the image and revisit intention of a destination (Whipple & Tach, 1988; Chang, 2006; Sahin & Balta, 2007). On the other hand, destination governments and tourism industries are increasingly aware of the need to improve the service quality of the tour guiding profession; for instance by investing in training programs (Weiler & Ham, 2002; Dioko & Unakul, 2005) as well as quality assurance and regulatory mechanisms (Ap & Wong 2001; Black & Weiler, 2005). This is a particularly pressing issue in many Asian destinations in the face of fierce intra-regional competition.

Macau is one of the destinations in Asia which faces strong competition from established destinations in the neighborhood such as Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Singapore (Leong, 2007). Macau has been experiencing a rapid expansion of the inbound tourism market over the past decade. According to the Macau Government Tourists Office (MGTO) (MGTO, 2008a), visitor arrivals in 2007 exceeded 27 million, representing a growth of 22.7 per cent from 2006. The advent of the liberalization of the gaming industry in 2002 (Yong and Fu, 2006) and the resultant significant scale expansion of the casino business, as well as the relaxation of travel arrangements made by the Mainland Chinese government have significantly contributed to the exponential growth of Macau's tourism industry in recent years.

In spite of the thriving success in the inbound market, the large influx of visitors has posed great challenges to the MGTO and the travel industry on retaining and recruiting enough well-qualified and well-trained tour guides in the industry, especially when there is an acute labor shortage in Macau (Kale & De, 2006). More importantly, the monitoring and controlling of the service quality of the tour guides has become more difficult. There are a number of reported incidents of rows and conflicts between tourists and the tour guides (The China Post, 2007; Macau Daily Times, 2008) about excessive shopping trips and the changing of the original itinerary without the agreement of the tourists. These incidents resulted in a growing crisis of confidence in the tour guiding profession in Macau. Accordingly, there is a pressing need for policy makers and stakeholders to understand the current state of the tour guiding profession and its impact on the travel industry in Macau. It is in such a context that this study attempts to examine the factors and the underlying causes that affect the service quality of the tour guides in Macau. This study is part of a wider research project that seeks to document and explore the issues and problems affecting the tour guiding professions in the Southeast Asia region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Roles of tour guides

According to the European Federation of Tourist Guides Associations (EFTGA), a tour guide is defined as a person who “guides groups or individual visitors from abroad or from the home country around the monuments, sites and museums of a city or region; to interpret in an inspiring and entertaining manner, in the language of the visitor’s

choice, the cultural and natural heritage and environment” (EFTGA, 1998). In Macau, MGTO defined a tour guide as “the person who receives and escorts tourists, provides commentaries as a tourist service, and receives remuneration for his or her service” (MGTO, 2008b). Although the two definitions differ, both emphasize the “guide/lead” and “interpret/inform” roles of the tour guide, which are respectively represented under the “leadership sphere” and “mediatory sphere” in Cohen’s (1985) model on the dynamics of the tour guide’s role (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1]

Cohen’s (1985) model delineates the four major components of the role of modern tour guides, namely, “Original Guide” (pathfinder), “Professional Guide” (mentor), “Animator,” and “Tour-leader”. Whilst the model aptly captures the roles tour guides play based on the needs of the tourists, there are other “mundane” roles that they perform. For instance, as employees of the tour operators, tour guides are the “spokespersons” representing the image and reputation of the company and the “salespersons” selling the next tour (Grönroos, 1978; Fine & Speer 1985; Chang, 2006). From the host destination’s perspective, they serve as the “interpreters” translating the cultures and values of the host destination (Holloway 1981; Katz 1985; Ryan & Dewar 1995) and as the “mediators” mediating between the host destination environment and its visitors (Weiler & Davis, 1993; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001). In a wider scope, they also function as the “ambassadors” of the host communities who are entrusted with the public relations missions “to encapsulate the essence of place” (Pond, 1993:vii) and serve as the window to a particular destination (Holloway, 1981; Pond, 1993). The studies by Black and Weiler (2005) and Zhang and Chow (2004) provide a comprehensive summary on the various roles tour guides play.

Among the many diverse roles tour guides play, there has been a strong emphasis on their “mediator” role which includes mediation between the tourists and the tour operator, hotels and other tourism suppliers (Dahles, 2002), as well as between the tourists and the host community and environment (Weiler & Davis, 1993; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001). The harmonious balancing of the benefits of these various stakeholders is most ideal; however, as cited by Dahles (2002), the process of mediation in the actual tourism practice can be problematic, and the roles of tour guides are not likely to be harmonious at all times. In fact, the different roles are often in conflict with one another (Holloway, 1981). Moreover, tour guides have an “entrepreneurship” role to fulfil, as they have a need to make their encounters with tourists profitable for themselves (Steege, Stam & Bras, 1999; Dahles, 2002). Based on these arguments, there is a tendency of an over-idealization on tour guides’ “mediator” role with their various stakeholders including tourists, tour operators, host communities, host environment, and government authorities (Steege *et al.*, 1999; Dahles, 2002), and an under-awareness on tour guides’ “entrepreneur” role to satisfy their own economic self-interests.

Service quality in tour guiding

Service quality is defined as the difference between customer expectations and perceptions of service (Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1988). Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) posit that a customer’s assessment of overall service quality depends on the “gap” between expectations and perceptions of the actual performance. According to this paradigm, customers decide whether they are satisfied, and a smaller gap between expectations and perceptions leads to the service being perceived as a higher

quality, thus resulting in customer satisfaction.

In the context of tour guiding, the perceived service quality of a tour guide can be evaluated through three major constructs: (1) core service delivery, (2) customer orientation, and (3) communication effectiveness (Heung, 2008). Heung (2008) explicates that core service refers to the essence of a tour guide's service (e.g. follows the agreed itinerary, provides commentaries, and assures customer satisfaction during the tour) which the guide must deliver with consistency. Customer orientation, on the other hand, denotes the extent the guide puts tourists' needs and interests ahead of his/her own in providing superior value to tourists (e.g. not to be focused on short-term self-interest and not to adopt a 'hard' selling approach to tourists). Communication involves the exchange of information (e.g. communicates the itinerary/arrangement to tourists and handles tourists' inquiries) and is regarded as a crucial function of the tour guide. Likewise, Ap and Wong (2001) suggest that the tour guide's attitude with respect to service (particularly in terms of the extent of money-oriented or customer service-oriented), product knowledge, and communication skills are significant aspects in assessing the perceived service professionalism of the guide.

Indeed, the service quality aspect of the tour guiding profession is starting to receive more research attention. For instance, Zhang and Chow (2004) identified twenty tour guide service quality attributes pertinent to mainland Chinese tourists. The six most important attributes perceived by Chinese tourists were: (1) punctual, (2) able to solve problems, (3) knowledge of destination, (4) honest and trustworthy, (5) inform safety regulations, and (6) deliver service promised in itinerary. Other studies have collectively contributed to a growing insight and understanding of the service quality

aspect of tour guides (Mossberg, 1995; Wang, Hsieh, & Huan, 2000; Wong, 2001; Heung, 2008). Nonetheless, most of these studies have taken the perspective of tourists and have not taken account of the guiding profession's and the industry practitioners' perspective.

While Ap and Wong (2001) raised and discussed some of the issues and challenges facing the tour guiding profession in Hong Kong from the tour guide and industry practitioners' perspective and provided insights into understanding the nature of and issues faced by the tour guiding profession in Hong Kong, this study extends and delves more deeply into those challenges and seeks to identify and evaluate specific (and, new) tour guiding issues which are unique to Macau, a strongly competitive Asian tourist destination which still receives a large number of tourists. By exploring and investigating the viewpoints of various stakeholders, this research aims to present an updated and in-depth analysis of the current state of the tour guiding profession and its impact on the travel industry in Macau.

The development of the tour guiding profession in Macau

MGTO is a government statutory body with the task of pursuing the overall goals defined by the tourism sector in Macau. It has five subdivisions, namely, Licensing and Inspections Department, Promotion and Marketing Department, Product Development and Special Projects Department, Research and Planning Department, and Administrative and Finance Division (MGTO, 2008c). The Licensing and Inspections Department of the MGTO is responsible for the issuing of Tour Guide Cards and monitoring of any illegal practices in the guiding profession. There is a strict

qualification requirements stipulated by MGTO, particularly, educational qualifications. For example, prospective Tour Guide Card applicants must pass the qualifying courses offered by the Institute for Tourism Studies (IFT) or obtain a diploma or bachelor's degree in the field of tourism offered by the IFT or other local or overseas higher education institutions approved by the IFT. As of the end of 2007, there were 1,317 licensed tour guides in Macau, representing a 6.8 per cent growth from 2006 (MGTO, 2008b).

The Macau Tourist Guide Association (MATGA) was established in July 2002. The MATGA is devoted to advancing the professional development of the tour guides in Macau. It also aims to promote unity and encourage communication between its members as well as the coalition and cooperation of the other guide associations in other parts of the world (MATGA, 2008). With the rapid growth of the tourism industry in Macau, the role of the MATGA as the official tour guiding association offering support to upgrade its members' service professionalism has been gaining momentum through its close cooperation with the IFT in providing new or refresher courses for member guides and by working closely with the MGTO to identify solutions for the problems faced by the guiding profession.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study research approach that is rooted in the philosophy of phenomenology, which offers the opportunity of discovering “the reality working behind the reality” (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2000). The two-phase data collection process included a first phase of secondary data collection from various

sources including travel and tourism literature, government reports, tour guide association websites, and newspaper databases to gain an insight into the current situation regarding the Macau tourism industry and the tour guiding profession. The second phase involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with authoritative sources from both the Macau Tour Guide Association and the Macau Government Tourist Office, as well as three practising tour guides in Macau to explore the issues and problems from multiple insiders' perspectives. According to Patton (2002, p.244), "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry". The sample size of qualitative inquiry is determined not by the number of interviewees but by data saturation, when no new information is discovered on the study phenomenon. Considering that the current study was mainly a pilot investigation with no intention to make generalization, a small sample size is adopted. However, it is germane to point out that the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings.

Purposive sampling was used as the sampling procedure in selecting the interviewees whose insights would be relevant to the issues being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With purposive sampling, the selection of the sample can include the most informed respondents in terms of knowledge of the studied topics and those most likely to affect change within the policy realm. Unlike most of the past studies that investigated the service quality aspects of tour guides from the perspectives of tourists, this study is purposely focused on the insiders' perspectives. It is believed that the underlying causes of the problems faced by the guiding profession would be more meaningfully investigated using a multiple insiders' perspectives approach involving the monitoring authority/government, tour guide association, and practicing tour

guides. Table 2 summarizes the profile of the interviewees.

[Insert Table 2]

Given the fact that some of the tour guiding issues and problems are sensitive, interviewees may be reluctant to discuss them in a group setting. As such, individual in-depth interview was considered a more appropriate method to obtain primary data in this study. All interviewees were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews were held in the beginning of June 2007 and completed by the end of July 2007. Each of the interviews lasted on average an hour and a half and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim into Chinese. The Chinese transcripts were then translated into English. The English transcripts were checked and compared with the Chinese transcripts and the audio recordings in order to ensure accuracy. A total of 53 pages of transcribed data were obtained.

Content analysis was employed as the means for contextualizing the connections between categories and themes in this study. According to Maxwell (1996), content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use. It provides new insights, increases a researcher's understanding of particular phenomena, or informs practical actions. This research technique enables the researcher to include large amounts of textual information and systematically identify its properties by detecting the more important structures of its communication content. Tree structures were constructed to identify the themes and evolving concepts with the aid of the NVivo computer program.

Triangulation of sources was used as a means to add to the credibility by

strengthening confidence in conclusions being drawn (Patton, 2002). For example, issues and problems recounted by the tour guides were validated by the discourse from the informants from the monitoring authority, or representatives from the tour guide associations (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1]

In addition, assistance was sought from two professional colleagues in the university to serve as peer debriefers in order to identify any hidden aspects in the transcripts. Member checking was done during the interview process in which the researchers asked relevant probing questions so as to assess whether interviewees' meanings were interpreted accurately. For instance, if an interviewee acknowledged that conflict between tourists and tour guides was caused by the unwelcome coercing into shopping by tour guides, the researchers would accordingly probe into the "unwelcome coercing into shopping" variable by asking: "Could you tell me more the possible consequences of unwelcome coercing into shopping?" This iterative process permitted the researchers to ensure the credibility of interpretation that emerged from the interviews. These strategies collectively contributed to the trustworthiness of data, thus enhancing the rigor of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are delineated under two themes: *tourist-generating country* and *host destination*, and four categories: *travel agent*, *tourists*, *tour operators*, and *tour guides*. Specific factors affecting the service quality of the tour guiding profession in Macau are demarcated under the following six sub-categories: *unhealthy business*

practices, domination of market, immaturity of tourist market, changing tourist behavior, intense competition between inbound tour operators, and human resource issues. Figure 2 illustrates the structure of the categorization.

[Insert Figure 2]

Tourist-generating country – travel agents

1. Unhealthy business practices

The findings reveal that many of the outbound travel agents in Mainland China have adopted unhealthy business practices that have severely affected the service quality of the guiding profession in Macau. A number of researchers have previously raised the issue of unhealthy business practices of travel agents in Mainland China (Ap & Wong, 2001; Wong, 2001; Zhang & Chow, 2004; King, Dwyer & Prideaux, 2006; Zhang, Heung & Yan, 2009). The findings of this study corroborate this assertion and at the same time classify the major unhealthy business practices into the two categories: *below-cost tour fare* and *below-cost reception fee*.

The *below-cost tour fare* practice is commonly known as the “*zero/negative tour fare*” in the travel industry. It is found to be a prevalent practice in the Mainland Chinese tourism market. This practice pertains to the system in which outbound travel agents in Mainland China use a low tour fare that is under their actual cost to attract tourists to join group tours. On the other hand, the *below-cost reception fee* practice, also known as the “*zero/negative reception fee*,” is also another current unhealthy business practice. It refers to the situation in which outbound travel agents in Mainland China give a below-cost reception fee or even none at all for inbound tour operators (ITOs) in Macau to receive their tour groups. The findings reveal that the *below-cost*

reception fee practice actually stems from the *below-cost tour fare* practice. Due to the fact that the tour fare received from tourists are below-cost, outbound travel agents in Mainland China must cut costs and logically decline to offer a proper reception fee to the ITOs in Macau. In most cases, they allow the ITOs to “bid” for the right to receive incoming group tours with the lowest possible reception fee. In some extreme cases, the ITOs even have to pay out a fee just to “bid” for the right to receive the tour groups. Consequently, the ITOs will incur expenses even before the tour groups arrive. To cut costs, they tend to shift the financial pressure to the tour guides, for instance, by setting a “shopping quota” per tourist for the tour guides to meet. The comment of a Macau tour guide duly reflects the seriousness of this problem:

“As the reception fee is low or even negative, the tour operators have the [financial] pressure, and tour guides have the [financial] pressure too [sic]. As such, service quality of the tour guide is bound to decline, and this is a critical issue faced by the guiding profession.”(MOTG-2)

Under the aforementioned circumstances, the tour guides will inevitably have to bring tourists to visit various designated shops to coerce them to purchase or join optional tours to cope with the financial pressure laid by the ITOs. Hence, instead of focusing on delivering the “core services” (Heung, 2008), the guides are forced to shift their focus to that of the “salesperson” role. This practice inevitably downgrades the quality of the tour and is likely to be detrimental to both tourist satisfaction and the perceived service quality of the tour guides.

2. Domination of the market

The findings further reveal that many travel agents in China do not directly deal with the ITOs in Macau. Instead, they make their deals through wholesale travel agents (WTAs) which are mostly located in Shenzhen or Guangzhou. This is because these

WTAs have a long-established wide network to receive tourists from all over China and can usually obtain air or train tickets at a relatively lower price. For those provinces whose residents are still required to travel to Macau in tour groups and not as individual travellers, it would be much more efficient in terms of logistics for the travel agents in these provinces to send the tour groups to Macau via the WTAs in Shenzhen or Guangzhou. Besides, China is a country with a large geographic span covering 9.6 million square kilometres, many of the travel agents scattered all over China do not have the staff or resources to deal with the ITOs in Macau directly. These travel agents would usually sell the tour groups to the WTAs in Shenzhen or Guangzhou, as they would benefit from the economies of scales and efficiency in outbound logistics. Likewise, it would be uneconomical for individual ITOs in Macau to recruit tours directly from the many provinces in Mainland China by themselves. Consequently, these practices have led to the situation in which the Mainland Chinese outbound market to Macau is largely dominated by a few large WTAs in Shenzhen and Guangzhou. The account made by a veteran Macau tour guide stresses the problem:

“Wholesale travel agents in Mainland China serve as intermediaries. They receive tours from all over China and sell them to ITOs. In fact, there are many intermediaries involved, and everyone has to earn a profit. However, tourists are not aware of this. They paid for a high tour fare but eventually did not receive the service quality they would have expected. Unfortunately, there are not much monitoring measures adopted by the Mainland Chinese government.” (MOTG-3)

This market domination by the WTAs has given them the advantages of *hefty profit-taking* and *misrepresentation of tour quality*, which are at the expense of the ITOs and the tour guides in Macau. It is found that very often a large part of the tour fare is taken by the WTAs as intermediary fee, and most often the tour itineraries and components presented by the travel agents in Mainland China to the tourists are of a higher quality. Another tour guide offered explication on the situation:

“...For instance, if it is stated in the itinerary that a seafood meal will be arranged, when they reached us, it will become an ordinary meal, and the difference had been taken by WTAs in Shenzhen. And if there should not be shopping in the itinerary, when they reached us, shopping will be included.” (MOTG-2)

In many cases, the tour itineraries and components are often not what the tourists would have expected. Since “deliver service promised in itinerary” is considered an important “core service” by many tourists (Zhang and Chow, 2004; Heung, 2008), this situation often leads to arguments and conflicts between the tour guides and the tourists, causing much dissatisfaction on the service quality of the tour guide.

Tourist-generating country – tourists

3. Immaturity of tourist market

The immaturity of the tourist market in Mainland China is found to be a factor that indirectly affects the service quality and healthy development of the guiding profession in Macau. The China tourism market, especially the outbound market, is relatively immature compared with the other well-developed markets. One of the main problems that arises from this is that tourists tend to be *overly-concerned about the tour fare instead of the quality of the tour itself*. The immaturity of the tourism market in Mainland China is largely attributable to its relatively short history. It was only in 1984 that the Chinese government permitted Chinese citizens to visit their relatives in Macau. Eventually in 1990, China began to relax its policies on outbound travel, and Chinese citizens were allowed to join group tours to visit some Southeast Asian countries for tourism purposes (Wen & Tisdell, 2001). The insight of an authoritative source from MATGA reflects this phenomenon:

“As the outbound market in Mainland China is immature, tourism bureaus in China must monitor their tour operators, in particular, their way of doing

business, so that unhealthy and unethical practices can be eliminated. Or else, there is not much we can do on our side.” (MATGA-1)

As pointed out by King et al. (2006), China’s travellers will typically only accept low prices which are not compatible with the input costs. The findings of this study appear to corroborate this phenomenon and further reveal the fact that tourists are overly concerned with tour fares instead of the quality of the tour components. Hence, travel agents in Mainland China emphasize low prices to attract tourists, and as a result the tour fare is forced to be below-cost. Coupled with the profit-taking and price dictation practices by the WTAs, the reception fee being paid to the ITOs in Macau is often minimal if not below-cost. Consequently, the ITOs are not able to afford highly skilled guides and even guide fees, causing much grievance to the tour guiding profession. Without appropriate remuneration, the tour guides are forced to coerce tourists into making as many purchases as possible in a desperate attempt to meet the shopping quota and to secure their personal earnings. This inevitably results in the neglect of their “core services” (Heung, 2008). Accordingly, both tour quality and the tour guides’ performance are unavoidably perceived as downgraded, thus further fostering the consumers’ unwillingness to pay high package prices. These events form a vicious circle.

4. Changing tourist behaviour

Another factor found to have an indirect adverse effect on the service quality of the tour guides in Macau is the *changing tourist behaviour* in the tourist-generating country. More specifically, the changing tourist behaviour identified in this study relates to the tourists’ *spending attitude* and *purchasing power*. Since the relaxation of travel restrictions in Mainland China, more and more Mainland Chinese tourists have

visited Macau. Their *spending attitude* has been increasingly prudent along with the increased travel experience and increased understanding and knowledge about Macau, either obtained first-hand or through friends and relatives. Furthermore, the extension of the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) by the Mainland Chinese government to more cities has resulted in a rapid growth in the number of Chinese residents who are allowed to visit Macau as individual travellers. The findings reveal that there are an increasing number of Chinese tourists who travel on the IVS, especially among the repeat visitors. For those who travel in tour groups, their demographic profiles have changed, and they have a relatively lower spending power compared with the tour group members in previous times. The comment of a Macau tour guide corroborates this trend:

“Nowadays, those who join tour groups are mostly elderly, retirees, women, and children. They usually travel during summer vacation, and have a relatively lower spending power. Those with higher spending power would not be first time traveler to visit Macau, and they do not need to join tour groups and will usually travel as individual travelers. So, the spending powers of Mainland Chinese group tourists are very different as compared with previous years.”(MOTG-2)

Nonetheless, the *below-cost tour fare* and *below-cost reception fee* practices have remained unchanged. Therefore, the ITOs still face a great financial pressure to recover costs, and the tour guides still need to meet the shopping quota preset by the ITOs. Due to these changes in tourist behaviour, it becomes more difficult to meet the shopping quota, and the incomes earned by the tour guides have declined compared with the previous times. Consequently, the changes in tourists’ *spending attitude* and *purchasing power* have become one of the sources of conflict between the tour guides and tourists.

Host destination – tour operators

5. Intense competition between inbound tour operators

As a result of the prevailing *below-cost tour fare* practice in Mainland China, the ITOs in Macau have to compete against each other to offer the lowest possible reception fee or even pay out a certain amount to “bid” for the incoming tours. The intense competition among ITOs is found to have led to a number of problems affecting the guiding profession, namely, *diminution of guide fee*, *“mai tou” fee practice*, *shopping quota*, and *prepayment of tour expenses*.

Among these problems, the *diminution of guide fee* is found to have a severe damaging impact on the performance of the tour guides. As a result of the intense competition to “bid” for the incoming tours, the ITOs do not receive a proper reception fee to cover all the necessary expenses for conducting the tour. A number of them have resorted to lowering or even removing the “guide fee” (the fee paid to a tour guide as a service fee for conducting the tour) to save costs. The findings further suggest that even if there is no guide fee for Mainland Chinese tours, many tour guides are still willing to receive the tour because they have to earn a living. It is not surprising then that as the incomes of the tour guides are affected, their service quality fall accordingly.

The intense competition has also brought about the practice of the ITOs asking the tour guides to pay a fee, usually accordingly to the number of tourists in the tour group, to “buy” for the right to receive the group. This is commonly known as the *“mai tou”* (literally meaning “buy head”) fee in the industry. As the tour guides pay a fee to “buy” the tour groups, tourists become analogous to “commodities” serving as a means to help them recover the fee they have paid and to make money. Consequently, the

“*mai tou*” fee practice has led to an undesirable opportunistic and money-oriented mentality (Ap and Wong, 2001) in the guiding profession that severely impairs the service quality of the tour guides.

The findings also indicate that in order to shift the financial pressure to the tour guides, many ITOs require them to meet a preset *shopping quota* per tourist. This statement from an authoritative source from the MATGA discloses the details of this practice:

“Some tour operators would set a quota on how much each tourist must spend. In this circumstance, the tour guide must bring the tourists to go for shopping and meet the quota, or else the tour guide will have to pay for a fine to the tour operator.”(MAGTA-1)

The observation of another Macau tour guide provides further substantiation on the issue:

“Nowadays, the financial pressure on the tour guides is getting higher as the shopping quota is being set. And the negative tour fare [practice] is getting more severe...the reception fee received by tour operators is low, and tour guides have to bear the financial pressure. For example, some tour operators stipulated that it is only when the shopping quota is met, the tour guides can get the tips....it is common that there will be no tips, or tips will be deducted if the quota was not met.” (MOTG-3)

Obviously, if the quota is not met, the tour guides will face the consequences of paying a fine or their tips being deducted. It is also found that in many cases, the ITOs in Macau require the tour guides to *prepay tour expenses* such as meals, accommodations, or other expenses on behalf of the company. This way, a great deal of the financial risk is shifted to the tour guides, adding on to their financial pressure. Current practice suggests that the tour guides may claim these expenses from the company, but in many cases, they will only be reimbursed at least half a year later. This unfair loading of the financial burden on the tour guides has caused much dismay and

grievance among those in the tour guiding profession.

Host destination – tour guides

6. Human resource issues

The study findings indicate that a number of human resource issues are besetting the guiding profession in Macau, namely, *lack of recognition of the tour guide by the employer, low and unstable income, lack of commitment by tour guides, high turnover rate of guides, and new immigrant tour guides.*

The findings uncover that the *lack of recognition of the tour guide by the employer* is a crucial issue affecting the service quality of the tour guides. It is found that many ITOs do not render enough recognition to the serving guides. They are generally unwilling to offer them competitive remuneration, resulting in the tour guides being forced to be treated like part-time or freelance employees, although most of them in reality work as fulltime employees. In addition, due to the *below-cost tour fare* practices prevalent in the Mainland Chinese inbound market, the ITOs tend to employ exploitative means to cut costs and shift the financial pressure to the tour guides. This has further diminished the recognition given to them. As such, the tour guides' employment status, benefits, and interests lack protection.

Low and unstable income, as one of the ensuing consequences of the *lack of recognition by the employer*, is found to be another key factor that can severely affect the service quality of the tour guides. It is found that there is no basic salary for the tour guides in Macau, and most of the time they have to prepay part of the tour expenses out of their own pockets. The latter is largely attributable to the fact that the ITOs in Macau do not receive sufficient reception fees from Mainland Chinese travel

agents. The opinion of a veteran tour guide in Macau provides insight on this issue:

“Low income is one of the major factors that would affect a tour guide’s service quality and professionalism. In Macau, casinos often offer a high salary, and many tour guides prefer to join the gambling industry instead. As income would affect motivation, if the salary of tour guides cannot be raised to an acceptable level, it would be very difficult to attract new tour guides to join the profession, or experienced guides would choose not to stay in the profession.”(MOTG-1)

As articulated by this veteran tour guide, “*income would affect motivation,*” it is not surprising that the motivation of the tour guides are negatively affected by the low and unstable income. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that there are an overwhelming number of tour guides who are on a part-time or freelance employment basis. As a result, there is a general *lack of commitment* within the tour guiding profession, causing a prevailing despondent sentiment among the tour guides that the guiding profession is beleaguered and lacks a promising future.

Altogether, the above issues have lead to a *high turnover rate* in the guiding profession. Many tour guides have been attracted to join other industries if the pay and working conditions are much more favourable. The account of an authoritative figure in the MATGA describes the high turnover situation:

“The turnover rate of the tour guides in Macau is very high. Many tour guides, especially those who have higher education background or are proficient in foreign languages have change jobs. Many of them have joined casinos or hotels as a receptionist or PR officer. The working conditions and pay are much better. Among those who stayed, 60% are new immigrant tour guides, or those who are over 45 years of age whom would not like to change jobs due to their age.”(MATGA-1)

As revealed by the statement, the problem is further worsened by the acute labor shortage in many professions in Macau (Kale & De, 2006), as the territory is developing rapidly as a multipurpose destination and has a high demand for personnel for many industries. With a *low and unstable income, and a lack of recognition by the*

employer, the travel industry is facing great challenges in recruiting quality new guides and retaining skilled and experienced guides in the workforce.

On the other hand, the statement also reflects that the emergence of *new immigrant tour guides* is another issue besetting the tour guiding profession in Macau. The new immigrant tour guides refers to the new immigrants from Mainland China who have joined the Macau tour guiding workforce. The new immigrant tour guides have dominated the guiding workforce in Macau in recent years. According to the MATGA informant, “*new immigrant tour guides constitute 60 per cent of the guiding workforce in Macau.*” The service quality of the guiding profession has been more difficult to control and monitor because of this trend. There are a number of reasons attributable to this. First, due to the need to minimize operating costs, tour operators hire relatively inexperienced new immigrant tour guides. As they are inexperienced, their service quality and professionalism varies greatly. Second, the findings suggest that even if the new immigrant tour guides have obtained the Tour Guide Card, they may not be able to introduce or interpret Macau in depth, especially in relation to cultural aspects. Third, since they have received their education in Mainland China and have a strong Mainland Chinese cultural influence, they tend to be more ready to accept the “group mentality” commonly shared by the Mainland Chinese-based tour operators. This “group mentality” includes unhealthy practices such as the tour guides paying tour operators a “*mai tou*” fee to be able to receive tour groups, the tour guides paying tour operators a deposit, and others as common “norms” in the industry. The new immigrant tour guides’ ready acceptance of these “norms” has further reinforced these unhealthy practices within the industry. Fourth, as new immigrant tour guides share a different mentality and culture with the existing local tour guides, they often try

to form their own circle, union, or association that could lead to fragmentation of the guiding profession. Consequently, if the service quality of the new immigrant tour guides are not monitored and controlled effectively, it may have detrimental effects on the whole quality of the guiding profession.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The development of a sustainable tourism market relies on the concerted efforts of its various stakeholders, especially the tour guides, as they are one of the most visible and critical players in the tourism industry. The recognition of their importance and the effort in raising their level of proficiency and professionalism will benefit the tourism industry with greater potential for higher profits and greater efficiency. Accordingly, a number of recommendations are suggested for the policymakers and industry practitioners attempting to maintain or improve the service quality of the tour guiding profession in Macau.

First, the below-cost tour fare and below-cost reception fee practices should be outlawed. Despite the crackdown on the below-cost tour fare practices by Chinese tourism authorities around 2000 (Zhang et al., 2009), these practices are still in existence. As Zhang et al. (2009, p.371) has recently pointed out these practices are “flagrant breaches of consumer rights and business ethics, and they should be eliminated to ensure the healthy development of both the Chinese outbound tourism and other similar travel markets.” Consequently, the respective authorities and industry members in Macau should consider liaising with the tourism authorities in Mainland China to establish a “minimum price” for receiving tour group, thereby eliminating the root of the many unhealthy practices currently prevailing in the Mainland China travel

industry. Second, to protect tourists from possible misrepresentation of tour quality caused by the WTAs in Mainland China, it is essential for the tourism authorities in Mainland China to work cooperatively with Macau to require all outbound travel agents, intermediaries, and the ITOs to strictly follow a contract system for the tour itinerary. Third, tourism authorities in Mainland China should provide education to Chinese tourists to foster a more appropriate attitude and to reduce excessive emphasis on tour fares as a priority. The current practice of focusing on the sale of an extremely low tour fare must be publicized to raise the tourists' general awareness, as it is incompatible with the input costs and puts subsequent pressure on tourists to make a substantial amount of purchases. Fourth, Macau tour operators should be encouraged to recognize the tour guides' real contribution by providing them with a proper level of remuneration and employment status. The Macau government should work with the tour guiding industry to enforce a minimum level of remuneration for the tour guides. If the guiding profession has a more reasonable and stable income that does not rely completely on commissions, then their financial pressure will be relieved, allowing them to focus on their core and essential guiding roles. Finally, new immigrant tour guides should be encouraged to "acculturate" into the Macau tour guiding culture and the way of practice to enhance the cohesion of the guiding profession, for instance by providing additional training if necessary. This can be achieved by the concerted efforts from the tour guide association with the support of the travel industry and the government.

This study identifies a number of critical issues affecting the guiding profession in Macau. Most importantly, it reveals that a number of these problems actually stem from the unhealthy business practices of the tourist-generating country, namely, Mainland China in the current study. Despite the well-recognized growing importance of the

Chinese outbound tourism market (UNWTO, 2003), there is a general lack of study on the prevalence of unhealthy business practices in the tourism sector in Mainland China, particularly to what extent those unhealthy practices have affected the travel industry and guiding profession in the host destination. This study scrutinizes the consequences of these unhealthy practices, thus, adding to the body of knowledge in this domain and providing a basis for further research.

Finally, this present qualitative study with its limited sample size aimed to contribute to the literature mainly as a pilot investigation without the intention of making any generalizations. In addition, it focused on Macau as a single case study due to time and resource constraints. Future research could undertake a larger-scale comparative study to explore more deeply the issues and problems faced by the tour guiding profession in other destinations to allow for comparisons and perhaps, generalizability to benefit the guiding profession and the tourism industry as a whole. In fact, the researchers are currently extending their research to investigate the issues in the tour guiding professions in other Asian regions, so the issues and problems affecting the broader guiding profession can be examined from diverse perspectives.

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Table 1. Cohen’s Model on the Dynamics of the Tour Guide’s Role

	Outer-directed	Inner-directed
Leadership Sphere	(1) <u>Original Guide (Pathfinder)</u> (instrumental primacy) a. Direction b. Access c. Control	(2) <u>Animator</u> (social primacy) a. Tension-management b. Integration c. Morale d. Animation
Mediatory Sphere	(3) <u>Tour-leader</u> (interactionary primacy) a. Representation b. Organization	(4) <u>Professional Guide (Mentor)</u> (communicative primacy) a. Selection b. Information c. Interpretation d. Fabrication

Source: Adopted from Cohen, 1985.

Table 2. Profile of the Interviewees

No.	Code	Primary Organizational Affiliation	Tour Guiding Experience & Specialization	Gender
1.	MATGA-1	The Macau Tourist Guide Association (MATGA)	• Not applicable	Female
2.	MGTO-1	The Macau Government Tourist Office (MGTO)	• Not applicable	Male
3.	MOTG-1	Macau Tour Guide 1	• Over 33 years guiding experience • English- / Spanish-speaking tours	Female
4.	MOTG-2	Macau Tour Guide 2	• Over 4 years guiding experience • Mandarin- / Cantonese-speaking tours	Female
5.	MOTG-3	Macau Tour Guide 3	• Over 15 years guiding experience • Japanese- / Mandarin- / Cantonese-speaking tours	Male

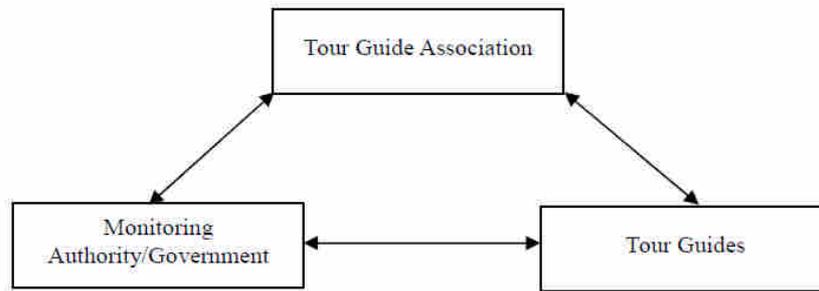


Figure 1 – Triangulation of Data Source

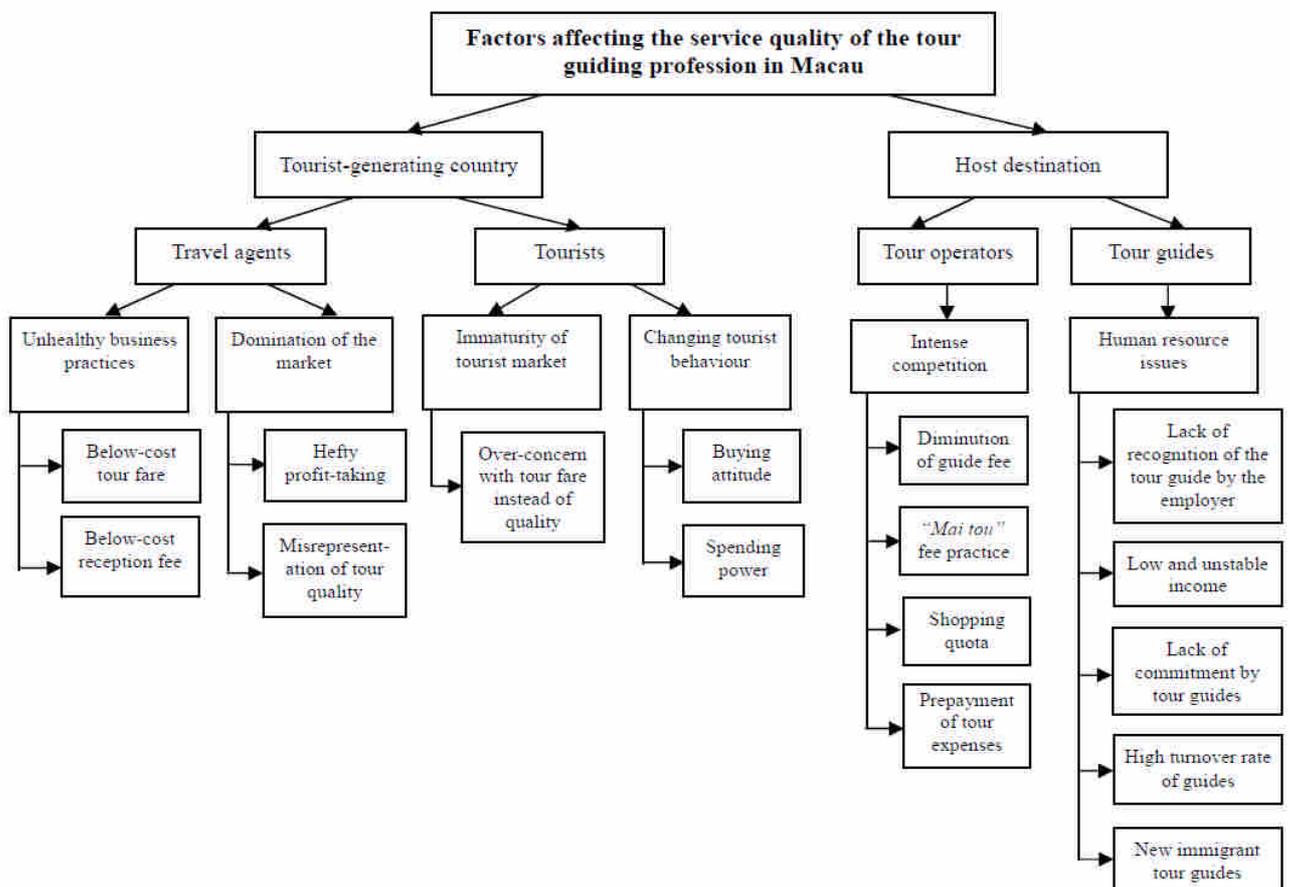


Figure 2. Factors Affecting the Service Quality of the Tour Guiding Profession in Macau