

THE QINGHAI-TIBET RAILWAY AND TIBET TOURISM: TRAVELERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract.—The Qinghai-Tibet railway opened in July 2006 and boosted Tibetan tourism markedly by increasing the accessibility and affordability of travel from China to Tibet. This study evaluates the railway's impacts on tourists' travel decisions and experiences in Tibet. The relative importance of the train journey in comparison with the destination experience in Tibet is also examined. A survey was used to collect the perceptions of 187 travelers on the Qinghai-Tibet train in May 2007. Important destination choice factors for Tibet are identified. The importance of the railway to tourists' destination choice of Tibet and in their overall travel experience of Tibet is confirmed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Tibet has long been a desirable travel destination for people from China and elsewhere because of its unique natural environment and cultural characteristics. However, tourism development in Tibet has been hindered by its remote and inaccessible location. Travel to Tibet has increased substantially since the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in July 2006, raising new questions about tourism development, regional economic development, environmental protection, and the preservation of the Tibetan culture. A huge gap now exists between tourism demand and the available supply in terms of facilities, service quality, tourism planning, and experience and capability in tourism management.

This research investigates the Qinghai-Tibet railway and Tibetan tourism from travelers' perspectives by 1) identifying important motivational factors influencing the choice of Tibet as a travel destination; 2) evaluating how the opening of the railway line has influenced tourists' travel decisions and experiences; and 3) examining the relative importance of the train journey itself in comparison with the destination experience in Tibet. The following research questions will be explored:

1. What are the major factors influencing Chinese tourists' destination choice of Tibet?
2. How has the opening of the railway line to Lhasa influenced tourists' destination choice of Tibet?
3. What is the relative importance of the train journey in comparison with the destination experience in Tibet?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

As competition for tourists increases, destinations are challenged to differentiate and position themselves properly to attract more visitors. Therefore, understanding how tourists make destination choices is of critical importance to destination planners, managers, and marketers. The travel decision-making process is a crucial part of the overall travel process, which comprises pre-travel, on-site, and post-travel facets. It involves decisions on whether to go and where to go, leading to actual travel to certain destinations. Choice of travel destination is of primary concern for destination managers and tourism planners and is also the subject of tourism research. Past studies have enhanced the understanding of tourists' decision-making behaviors, and can be used to identify and prioritize the factors influencing the destination selection process. Furthermore, the interrelations between tourists' socio-demographic characteristics, their motivations, and their destination preferences can be measured, with practical implications for destination planning, development, and marketing.

Destination choice is made largely through interactions between destination attributes and individual tourists' motivations (Baloglu and Uysal 1996, Nicolau and Mas 2005). Tourists' socio-demographic characteristics also influence destination choice (Huybers 2003). Other relevant factors are familiarity with the destination, prior travel experience, and expectations and level of satisfaction. Moreover, these factors influence destination choices with different degrees of importance that are specific to each destination and individual tourist.

Transportation provides the essential link between tourists' origins and destination areas, facilitating the movements of travelers with diverse purposes (Page 2005). It also is an integral part of the overall travel experience (Lamb and Davidson 1996, Page 2005). The actual transportation vehicle provides a context and a controlled environment for tourists' travel between destinations and attractions (Page 2005). Although transportation can act as a main focus of the tourists' experiences, it is usually considered a supportive element that is less important than the destination attributes within the overall travel experience. Limited research has concentrated on the importance of the transportation experience in tourism, especially in comparison with the destination experience, or on the role of the journey in tourists' destination choices. Therefore, the relationships between transportation and overall tourist experience, the factors influencing transportation experiences, and the effects of the transportation experience on the overall travel experience need to be further investigated.

Although tourist destination choice has been extensively studied, few researchers have compared the destination choice preferences of pre-trip and post-trip tourists. Furthermore, in this study, a wide range of factors drawn from the literature is addressed, including socio-demographic variables, previous travel experience (first-time or repeat visitor), destination familiarity, expectations and level of satisfaction, and motivations (push and pull factors). This is the first study to focus on the train journey to Tibet from the travelers' perspective. The recent opening of the

Qinghai-Tibet railway provides the opportunity to analyze how the railway impacts tourism development in Tibet and travelers' decisions to visit Tibet, and to examine the relative importance of the train journey in comparison with the destination.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 The Qinghai-Tibet Railway

A direct passenger train connecting Beijing, China, and Lhasa, Tibet, first operated on July 1, 2006. The train journey takes 48 hours from Beijing to Lhasa, via Qinghai. The Qinghai-Tibet section of the railway is 708 miles long, stretching across the Tibetan Plateau from Golmud, Qinghai, to Lhasa. This is the world's highest railway. About 600 miles—or more than 80 percent of the Qinghai-Tibet section of the railway—is more than 13,000 feet above sea level and more than half the length of the railway is laid on permafrost. In addition to Beijing, passenger train services are available to Lhasa from several major cities in China, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, Lanzhou, and Xining.

3.2 Research Methods

Research by Pike (2006), Bowden (2006), and Seddighi and Theocharous (2002), among others, indicates that a survey can be used to understand travelers' decision-making behaviors and to identify their destination decision set. A questionnaire was chosen for primary data collection in the present research. In addition, the first author's personal observations on the train and at the destination, along with different sources of secondary data, provide complementary information. Two separate questionnaires were designed for train passengers on the outward and return train journeys between Beijing and Lhasa. To maintain the comparability of the pre- and post-visit questionnaires, the majority of questions were the same for both surveys. Changes were made in sections pertaining to the expected versus actual destination experience. The questionnaire was used for both Chinese travelers and those of other nationalities; it was first developed in English and then translated by the first author into Chinese. A pilot test in both English and Chinese was carried out and the final

Chinese and English versions of the questionnaires were developed based on the feedback.

The questionnaire was delivered by the researcher to travelers on the train using a cluster sampling technique. The capacity of the train between Beijing and Lhasa is 936 passengers. The train contains three types of seats: soft sleepers, hard sleepers, and hard seats. The survey was conducted in the hard sleeper cars, which have 60 beds in each car and are the most common type of car on the train (9 out of 16 cars). Thus, travelers in the cheapest and most expensive seats on the train were not interviewed. The survey was conducted from May 13 to May 22, 2007 on train journeys in both directions between Beijing and Lhasa. For each trip, four cars were visited during 4 hours to distribute and collect questionnaires. Eighty-two usable questionnaires were collected on the train from Beijing to Lhasa and 105 usable questionnaires were collected on the train from Lhasa to Beijing. Statistical tests were performed to evaluate the data, including descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, chi-square tests, and one-way ANOVA tests.

4.0 RESULTS

Most train travelers (96 percent) were Chinese citizens. Travelers from other countries comprised only 4 percent of the sample, so, international and domestic travelers were not separated or compared in the analysis. No significant differences were found between pre- and post-visit groups in terms of gender, age, place of origin, career, or monthly income. Despite a between-sample difference in education ($p=.044$), a high education level was common for both pre- and post-samples: more than 70 percent of respondents had a university education or above. The data suggest that train travelers to Tibet are from diverse age groups and employment categories, with slightly more males (56 percent) than females, generally high education levels, and monthly incomes that are higher than the Chinese average. These results support Wang's (2006) finding that tourists to Tibet are generally people with a high education level, high income, high consumption level, and comparatively good health. Also in Wang's study, 98 percent of

visitors were Chinese and mostly from north China, and 90 percent were visiting Tibet for the first time, mostly for personal reasons (86 percent) rather than business. Tibet is still a new tourism destination for most visitors. Wang (2006) also found that very few people in China have been to Tibet, but that the majority of them wish to go, which indicates a large potential market for Tibet tourism.

Tourists to Tibet have a distinctive travel pattern due to the characteristics of the destination itself. One feature is that the length of stay (6.4 days for the overall sample) is longer than trips to other tourism destinations in China. For all respondents, the transportation mode for the entire journey was predominantly by train (66 percent). Most of the remainder traveled in one direction by plane (31 percent). Because the pre- and post-visit samples were similar in their demographic and socio-economic features, we may infer that any observed differences between the two groups of travelers with respect to perceptions and satisfactions with the train journey and the destination cannot be explained by those factors.

Respondents' motivations for traveling to Tibet were measured by asking them to rate the importance of several reasons for visiting Tibet on a 5-point Likert scale. No significant differences were found between pre-visit and post-visit samples at the .05 level using independent sample t-tests. Information was sought on both pull and push factors. The former are mainly attributes of the destination. The five motivations categorized as pull factors all received high ratings on importance. In contrast, push factors were perceived to be much less important (as shown in Table 1). Although it appears pull factors play a much more important role in attracting tourists to Tibet than do push factors, the low scores for push factors may be attributed to the fact that the survey was conducted with travelers who had already overcome socio-psychological barriers and decided to travel to Tibet. Thus, generalizations from the results might need further support, perhaps through interviewing potential travelers prior to their decision to visit Tibet.

Table 1.—Analysis of motivation for traveling to Tibet

Motivation		Number of respondents.					Mean	S.D.
		1 *	2 *	3 *	4 *	5 *		
Tibetan culture	a	5	1	24	79	77	4.19	.879
Natural scenery	a	4	0	9	70	103	4.44	.778
Opening of the railway line	a	6	18	22	79	61	3.92	1.060
Novelty of Tibet	a	4	14	34	78	56	3.90	.987
Mysteriousness of Tibet	a	4	13	19	70	80	4.12	.998
Being away from daily routine	b	20	73	45	29	18	2.74	1.146
Learning experience	b	9	46	45	63	23	3.24	1.106
Personal satisfaction / self-esteem	b	18	57	47	41	23	2.97	1.190

* 1: very unimportant; 2: unimportant; 3: neutral; 4: important; 5: very important

a: Pull factors

b: Push factors

Independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to examine the between-group differences in motivations for traveling to Tibet among travelers with different demographic and socio-economic characteristics, such as education, monthly income, gender, age, and origin. In the literature, these characteristics are commonly considered to be personal attributes that influence travel motivations. No significant differences at the .05 level were identified in respondents' motivations to visit Tibet.

Respondents' perceptions of the train journey were explored through statements concerning reasons for choosing the train and satisfaction with the train journey as shown in Table 2. Again, evaluations were elicited using 5-point Likert scales. The view from the train (mean= 4.17) was the most important reason for deciding to travel by train, followed by gradual adaptation to the height of the destination (3.99),

safety (3.65), low price (3.34), desire to relax (3.13), and novelty (2.56). The generally high mean scores indicate that the train journey itself was an important reason for taking the train and was expected to be a positive part of the travel experience. It is perhaps surprising that novelty received the lowest score among the reasons for choosing to travel by train since the railway is new and provides a somewhat unusual travel experience,. Respondents were generally positive about the train journey, but many were not satisfied with the duration of travel (Mean=2.98) although it is inevitable that the journey by train is a long one.

When the satisfaction scores for the train journey were compared for pre- and post-visit travelers, significant differences were found for duration, schedule, service, facility, and view, but not for expenses. With the exception of duration of the journey, which was

Table 2.—Reasons for choosing the train journey to Tibet

		Novelty	Low Price	Safety	View	Altitude Adaptation	Relaxation
N	Valid	184	184	184	184	184	184
	Missing	3	3	3	3	3	3
Mean of Importance		2.56	3.34	3.65	4.17	3.99	3.13
S. D. of Importance		1.222	1.043	1.035	.838	.952	1.194
Importance*	1	40	3	5	2	2	13
	2	63	47	23	8	15	54
	3	31	42	43	15	27	40
	4	38	69	74	90	79	50
	5	12	23	39	69	61	27

* Importance scale: 1 = very unimportant; 2 = unimportant; 3 = neutral; 4 = important; 5 = very important

scored lower by post-visit travelers, high mean scores were recorded on the return journey. The higher satisfaction level (Mean= 4.23) on the views from the train received on the return journey compared with the pre-visit one (Mean= 3.87) were most likely because the most impressive views of the Tibetan plateau were seen at the start of the return journey. On the other hand, on the journey from Beijing to Lhasa, the most attractive views were seen at the end of the journey, after some respondents had already completed their questionnaires. As a traveler in both directions, the first author experienced differences in service on the train between the two journeys. The atmosphere on the return journey was more relaxed because the train staff was more easygoing. Although the facilities were basically the same, the higher service level may have also increased satisfaction with the facilities and the schedule.

Among the total sample of 184 respondents, the majority (N=142) agreed or strongly agreed that the train journey was an important part of the overall travel experience and was generally satisfied with the train journey (N=143). One hundred forty-nine respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a train is preferable to a bus when traveling to Tibet, while 106 respondents preferred the train over air travel. Fifty-two percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that if there had been no train, they would not have visited Tibet. This response demonstrates the train's great importance to Tibetan tourism. However, as the questionnaire survey was distributed only to passengers on the train, it is not possible to apply these statistics to the broad market for travel to Tibet. All respondents had actually chosen the train as their means of transportation to or from Tibet, already indicating their preference for train travel over other modes of transportation.

When comparing the train journey with the destination experience in Tibet, 58 out of 105 (55 percent) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the train journey was as important as the destination experience in Tibet. However, when rating the best part of the whole trip, 87 respondents out of 102 valid answers (85 percent) considered the destination experience to

be the best part, versus only 15 (15 percent) who voted for the train journey. Therefore, it can be inferred that when visitors are *traveling to* Tibet, the train journey is without doubt an important part of the overall travel experience; nonetheless, the destination, as the objective of the journey, is overall most important to tourists. Therefore, although the Qinghai-Tibet train has better facilities than other trains in China and a route designed for tourism, the quality of the destination is still vital to its success.

Suggestions concerning the train journey, tourism development, and the tourism products of Tibet were solicited in an open-question format in the post-visit questionnaire. With respect to suggestions concerning the train journey, 19 out of 38 comments mentioned that the train journey was too long. However, there are limitations to what can be done about this complaint. Another five respondents suggested that there be more programs or activities for passengers on the train, such as more on-board broadcasting to introduce the landscapes along the railway line, or more sightseeing stops for passengers to take a break and enjoy the views. These appear to be feasible suggestions. It was evident that some passengers felt bored during some of the journey. To the statement, "I do not feel bored during the train journey," only 17 disagreed and another 4 strongly disagreed, together constituting only 21 percent of all respondents. In spite of the above issue, the train journey was generally considered to be good with seven respondents emphasizing their satisfaction with the train journey in the open-ended question. Other minor issues included the difficulty in getting train tickets (two respondents), the need for a nonsmoking car (two respondents), and the safety of passengers' belongings (one respondent).

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Tibet's culture and natural scenery were identified as the most important pull factors for visiting Tibet. Mysteriousness and the novelty of Tibet were also highly rated as important reasons for visiting, indicating that Tibet is still a new tourism destination for many visitors. Another important factor was the opening of the railway line, which increased the

accessibility and affordability of traveling to Tibet, and was also an attraction in its own right. No difference was identified in travel motivations to Tibet among travelers from different demographic and socio-economic backgrounds.

The relative importance of the Qinghai-Tibet train journey in comparison with the destination experience in Tibet was analyzed quantitatively from travelers' perspectives. Satisfaction with the train journey was high, and most respondents considered the train journey itself to be an important part of the overall travel experience. More than half of the respondents agreed that if there were no train, they would not have visited Tibet. These findings consistently illustrate the great importance of the train to Tibetan tourism. When comparing the train journey with the destination experience in Tibet, about half of respondents agreed that the train journey was as important as the destination experience in Tibet. However, 85 percent of respondents considered the destination experience to be the best part of the trip.

In summary, it can be concluded that for travel to Tibet, the Qinghai-Tibet train, which has better facilities than other trains in China and follows a route designed for tourism, is without doubt an important part of the overall travel experience. Nonetheless, the quality of the destination, as the objective of the journey, is still vital to the success of the train journey in terms of its tourism use.

After the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, tourism in Tibet experienced a marked increase and it is likely to continue to increase. In order to understand tourism issues and to achieve sustainable development in the region, it is necessary to study the impacts of tourism on Tibet from economic, social, cultural, and environmental perspectives. Thus, the positive impacts of tourism could be identified and encouraged, and negative impacts could be controlled and managed. It is important to strive to preserve Tibet's natural environment, local culture, tradition, and religion. It also will be necessary to understand, balance, and manage the impacts to different stakeholders at the destination. This study examined Tibetan tourism only

from train travelers' perspectives, from which only generalizations can be made. Nevertheless, it deepens the understanding of tourism to Tibet.

Several future research opportunities can be identified. First, this study focused on train travelers to Tibet and excluded the perspectives of people traveling via other transportation modes. Future research could collect information on travelers using other means of transportation, especially air, in order to get a more complete view of travelers' perceptions and opinions about Tibetan tourism. Second, this study was developed based on a one-time questionnaire survey of 187 respondents, and the sample size was restricted by the travel time and the train route selected for the study. Therefore, more questionnaire surveys could be conducted at different times of the year during the peak and non-peak seasons and on different train routes to Lhasa. This approach would minimize the possible bias inherent in a single survey and facilitate comparisons between peak and non-peak seasons and among people from different geographical origins taking different train routes. Thus, more complete results could be achieved and practical suggestions on Tibetan tourism development could be derived with more confidence. Third, this study focused on the train journey and just scratched the surface of issues relevant to tourism planning and management at the destination. Therefore, more detailed on-site study of Tibet as a tourism destination could be conducted to better understand issues concerning destination management and operation in Tibet and to provide more information to guide future tourism development.

This study is novel as it is the first one to examine the newly available train journey to Tibet by examining train travelers' perceptions of both the journey and Tibet as a destination. Although it is widely recognized that both the journey and the destination are important in tourism, very few studies have explored the relative importance of the journey in comparison with the destination. Therefore, using train travel to Tibet as a case study, this paper provides a new perspective on the relationship between destination and transportation experiences in tourism.

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