

INVESTIGATING EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE TOURISTS WITH BRANDED HOTELS IN SERBIA: A CASE STUDY OF BOOKING.COM

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Abstract

Insight into the guest satisfaction and dissatisfaction is one of the most important tasks of any hotel. This insight can give hotels an opportunity to learn about their weaknesses and how they can remove them. Today, thanks to technological advances, guest satisfaction can be learned even after they leave the hotel. One way is to analyze the reviews on online platforms such as Booking.com. The aim of the paper is to analyze online hotel reviews produced by Chinese tourists on Booking.com to identify factors that lead to their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with branded hotels in Serbia, and therefore provide valuable information for the managers of these hotels. Chinese tourists were selected because of their growing importance in tourism in Serbia. The research included 249 reviews of Chinese tourists, whose analysis gained insights into how satisfied these tourists are and what needs to be improved.

Key Words: *Chinese tourists, branded hotels, Booking.com, Serbia*

JEL classification: *L83, Z32*

Introduction

In the last few years, China has been extremely important in the global tourism market (Johnson et al., 2020). Due to economic and income growth, as well as the desire to travel, China's domestic and outbound tourism has grown rapidly (Lin et al., 2015). Today, China is the world's first outbound tourism market (Lojo & Cànoves, 2015) which, only in the

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first half of 2018, recorded 71.31 million outbound tourists (China Outbound Tourism Research Institute, 2018).

It was found that the factors that attract Chinese tourists to the destination are destination resources, local services, prices and fewer barriers to travel (He et al., 2017). Among the popular destinations for Chinese tourists are countries from the Asian continent and from Europe (Xiang, 2013). Due to the fact that Europe is very well positioned and has adequate accommodation capacity to accommodate Chinese tourists (Andreu et al., 2013), European countries are gaining in popularity in this tourism market (World Tourism Organization – UNWTO, 2019). Tourists from China often choose the most popular destinations in Europe (Adamiak et al., 2018), but it has been noted that emerging destinations, including Serbia, have been gaining in popularity lately (UNWTO, 2019).

According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2020), the increase in the number of tourists and the number of overnight stays in the period from 2017 to 2019 was recorded. These data point to the fact that Serbia as a tourist destination is increasingly better positioned in the global market. The largest increase in the number of arrivals and overnight stays, compared to the period before, was recorded by tourists from China. From 5,000 Chinese tourists who visited Serbia in 2013, the number of tourists has increased over the years to reach 52,000 tourists in 2017.

With the increase in the number of tourists' arrivals, the number of overnight stays has also increased, from 14,000 in 2013 to approximately 95,000 in 2017 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). This tendency continued in 2018 and 2019. Out of the total number of foreign tourists overnight stays in Serbia in 2019, Chinese tourists were second, while the year before that they were third (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2019a; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2019b).

A study conducted by Dichter et al. (2018) showed that hotel brands are important for Chinese tourists when coming to Europe. It was found that a large number of Chinese tourists prefer accommodation in well-known branded hotels, primarily because of the universal standards and reliability of such hotels (China Travel Outbound, 2018). Liu et al. (2013) stated that worldwide hotel chains noticed this significant tourism market and developed adequate concepts and benefits aimed at improving the experience of Chinese guests.

According to UNWTO (2019), 69% of Chinese tourists book hotels online when traveling abroad. Moreover, in recent years information technology has made it possible to share travel experiences on social networks and other websites (Chiu & Leng, 2017).

Nowadays, social networks play an important role in tourism, and the Internet has become the most popular source of information for Chinese tourists (Liu et al., 2013; Nasolomampionona, 2014; Sugianto et al., 2018). For this reason, the Internet is an excellent source of information for tourism stakeholders focused on this market.

The aim of the paper is to analyze online hotel reviews produced by Chinese tourists on Booking.com to identify factors that lead to their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with branded hotels in Serbia. An acknowledgement of the aspects that affect their satisfaction most has the capacity to provide the understanding of the service aspects that hotels in Serbia which operate within international hotel brands need to improve in order to attract and satisfy this increasingly significant tourism market. The aim of the research was set in accordance with the relevant literature and the gained knowledge that Chinese tourists prefer well-known hotel brands, and that they mostly book hotels through online platforms.

Characteristics of Chinese tourists

Numerous studies have identified some socio-demographic characteristics of Chinese tourists. First, various studies have found that women travel more often than men, and that the highest percentage of outbound tourists are women (Agrusa et al., 2011; UNWTO, 2019; Wu et al., 2017b). Then, it was found that tourists are mostly young people - up to 34 years old (UNWTO, 2019; Xiang, 2013), who have college degree (Agrusa et al., 2011; Arlt, 2006; Wu et al., 2017a; Xiang, 2013). Managers have been discovered as the most common profession of outbound Chinese tourists. Most of them belong to the middle class with annual incomes between CNY 60 and 100 thousand (Xiang, 2013). This indicates that people who travel tend to have a high income (Arlt, 2006). Also, it was found that Chinese tourists have a high level of digital literacy. Chinese tourists are increasingly using mobile applications (Raspor et al., 2016) and online tools to book accommodations and airline tickets for their journeys (UNWTO, 2019).

Travel habits and preferences of Chinese tourists

Most Chinese tourists prefer to travel in groups (Nasolomampionona, 2014; Rosyidi, 2018) of 5 to 10 people (Agrusa et al., 2011). Most of them travel with family or friends (Liu et al., 2013), mainly for safety and cultural habits (UNWTO, 2019). The UNWTO (2019) and Sugianto et al. (2018) stated that Chinese tourists most often take 4 to 7 days trips. In destinations close to their place of residence, they stay for 3 nights (Agrusa et al., 2011) or up to 7 days (Rosyidi, 2018), while in more distant destinations they stay 7 to 15 days (Raspor et al., 2016). Chinese tourists most often travel abroad in the summer months, especially in August (Arlt, 2006; Raspor et al., 2016), while the smallest number of these trips is recorded in the winter months (Liu et al., 2013; Raspor et al., 2016).

Most Chinese tourists spend between CNY 5,000 (about USD 725) and CNY 10,000 (about USD 1,450) on the trip. On average, they spend about CNY 6,700 (about USD 970) per trip (UNWTO, 2019). A study conducted by Xiang (2013) found that Chinese tourists spend between CNY 1,000 and 1,500 a day during the trip. Years back, payment mechanisms have been evolving and Chinese tourists are keeping pace with global changes. Therefore, mobile payments have become very common for Chinese tourists, in addition to cash or card payments (UNWTO, 2019).

Safety (Kim et al., 2005; Li et al., 2011; Shu & Silva, 2017), accommodation, food and traffic (Shu & Silva, 2017) are identified as the main factors that influence the decision of Chinese tourists to visit a destination. They often travel to already explored destinations and follow the beaten track (Arlt, 2006). Therefore, cities are one of their favorite destinations (Adamiak et al., 2018, Raspor et al., 2016). A study conducted by Raspor et al. (2016) showed that Chinese tourists are moderately interested in re-visiting the same destination, with the exception of trips where the same destination is part of a multi-country travel packages.

During their trip, most Chinese tourists stay in hotels (Boonying, 2018; Hotels.com, 2018). They choose high-end (He et al., 2017), 4 or 5 star hotels, as well as B&B hotels (Raspor et al., 2016). When checking in, they expect to receive information about the hotel's location, surroundings and attractions (Tasmanian hospitality association, 2014). Most of all, Chinese tourists value cleanliness, safety and value for money (Li et al., 2011). They prefer full-service hotels in the city center (Liu et al., 2013), with modern furniture and decoration, and spacious rooms with plenty of natural light

(Wang et al., 2008). In the room they expect to find free slippers, toothpaste and toothbrush, non-refrigerated bottled water and a kettle (Tasmanian hospitality association, 2014). Their feeling of comfort in the room is most influenced by the existence of tea and coffee-making facilities (Liu et al., 2013). The dissatisfaction is mainly caused by the lack of slippers in the room (Wang et al., 2008; Tasmanian hospitality association, 2014), the inappropriate location of the hotel, staff unable to solve problems, the lack of things for personal use (toothpaste, toothbrush) (Wang et al., 2008). The most complaints are about the service quality, cleanliness of the bathroom and facilities (Au et al., 2014). The research also showed that Chinese tourists' dissatisfaction was often caused by a lack of signs and information in Chinese (UNWTO, 2019).

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to analyze online hotel reviews produced by Chinese tourists to identify factors that lead to their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with branded hotels in Serbia. In accordance with the purpose, the reviews available on Booking.com were used. Reviews were collected only for those hotels that operate as part of an international hotel brand. The sample consisted of 14 hotels (Table 1), which, according to a research conducted by the authors, belong to this group. The hotels are located in the three largest cities in Serbia: Belgrade (12), Novi Sad (1) and Niš (1). According to the data provided by the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia, most of these hotels (11) have four stars, while two hotels are categorized with five stars and one hotel with three stars (Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia, 2020).

Table 1: *Hotels in Serbia operating as part of an international hotel brand*

Hotel group	Hotel brand	Name of the hotel	Location of the hotel	Category
Accor	Mama Shelter	Mama Shelter	Belgrade	****
	Mercure	Mercure Belgrade Excelsior	Belgrade	****
Best Western Hotels & Resorts	Best Western	My Place	Niš	****
Falkensteiner	Falkensteiner	Falkensteiner Hotel Belgrade	Belgrade	****

Hotel group	Hotel brand	Name of the hotel	Location of the hotel	Category
Golden Tulip Hotels	Tulip Inn	Tulip Inn Putnik Belgrade	Belgrade	***
	Golden Tulip	Golden Tulip Zira Belgrade	Belgrade	****
Hilton	Hilton Hotels & Resorts	Hilton Belgrade	Belgrade	****
Hyatt Hotels	Hyatt Regency	Hyatt Regency Belgrade	Belgrade	*****
InterContinental Hotels Group	Crowne Plaza Hotels & Resorts	Crowne Plaza	Belgrade	****
	Holiday Inn Express	Holiday Inn Express Belgrade – City	Belgrade	****
Marriott International	Courtyard by Marriott	Courtyard Belgrade City Center	Belgrade	****
	The Luxury Collection	Metropol Palace	Belgrade	*****
	Sheraton	Sheraton Novi Sad	Novi Sad	****
Radisson Hotel Group	Radisson Collection	Radisson Collection Hotel, Old Mill Belgrade	Belgrade	****

Source: *Prepared by the authors*

The study was conducted in February 2020. At the time of the research, over 13,000 reviews were available for these hotels on Booking.com. Out of this number, 2% or 249 reviews were from Chinese tourists, so the study included these reviews only.

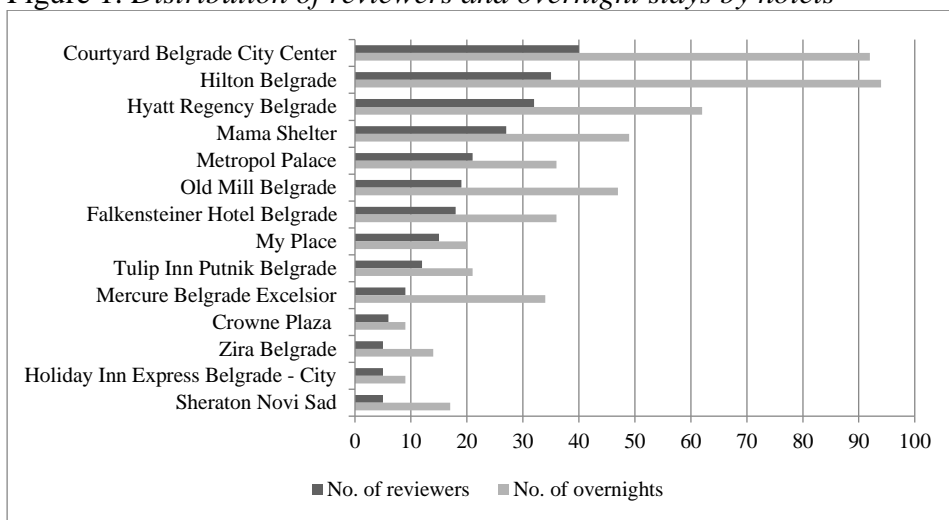
Based on the information available on Booking.com, the characteristics of the reviewers' stay in the observed hotels (number of nights and room type) were examined. Then, the average ratings were used to test whether satisfaction of Chinese tourists increased or decreased over time. Lastly, the keywords that the reviewers used to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the hotels were identified, analyzed and presented using the word cloud method. The use of this method, in addition to the visual representation of the text, has the advantage of highlighting keywords that repeated more often in reviews. So the words that repeat

more often in reviews appear larger in word cloud, and those that repeat less frequent appear smaller.

Results

The reviews were published from February 2018 until February 2020. In 2018, a total of 90 guests from China reviewed the observed hotels, while in 2019 this number rose to 144 reviewers (an increase of 60%). As a result, the number of overnight stays also increased over time, from 195 in 2018 to 314 overnight stays in 2019 (61% increase). In the first two months of 2020, there were a total of 15 reviewers and 35 overnight stays. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of reviewers and overnight stays by hotels.

Figure 1: *Distribution of reviewers and overnight stays by hotels*



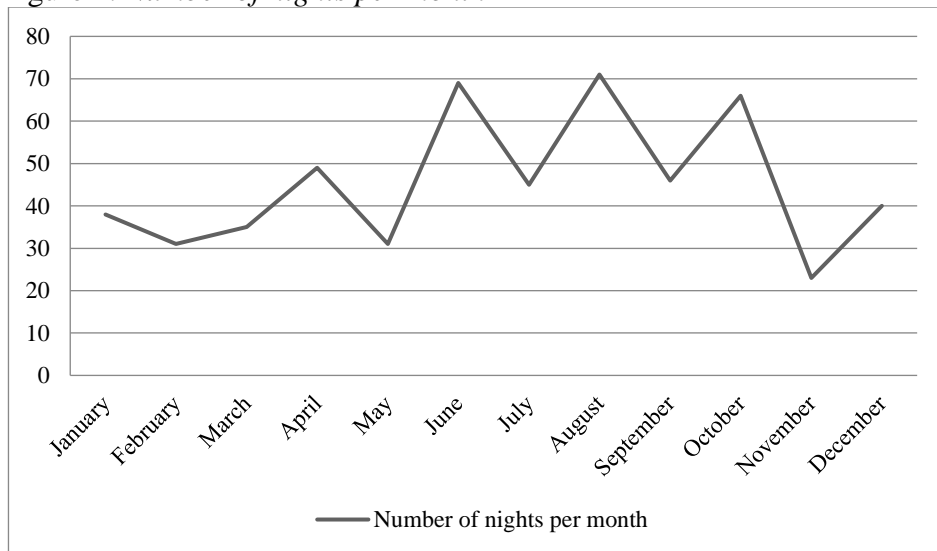
Source: *Prepared by the authors*

Of the total number of overnight stays (n=547), 78% were realized in 4-star hotels, followed by 18% in 5-star hotels and 4% in a 3-star hotel. The average number of overnight stays in the observed period was 2 (the minimum number of nights was 1 while the maximum was 10).

Concerning the structure of overnight stays by hotel category, most of them were realized in 4-star hotels (78%), then 5-star hotels (18%) and the least in the 3-star hotel (4%). The largest percentage chose a double room (92% of reviewers), while only 5% of tourists chose a suite and 3% a single room.

Observed by months, the highest percentage of overnight stays was recorded in August (14%), while the lowest was recorded in November (4%).

Figure 2: *Number of nights per month*

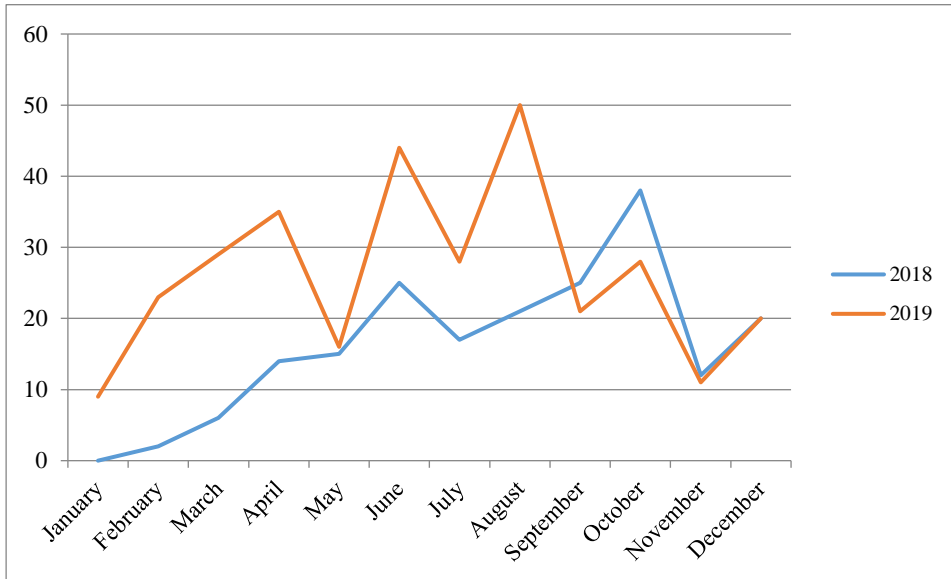


Source: *Author's calculation based on Booking.com reviews*

To understand how the number of overnight stays of Chinese tourists in 2018 and 2019 varied, the data for the two years were compared (Figure 2). Over the first six months of 2019, the number of overnight stays increased compared to 2018 (with the exception of May, when this number is approximately the same for both observed years). In the second half of 2018 there is a tendency of a slight decrease in the number of tourists compared to the first half of the year, with a sharp increase in October. The second half of 2019 saw a sharp increase in August, followed by a decline in overnight stays. In the last month of both observed years, the number of overnight stays of Chinese tourists was even.

One of the ways that reviewers express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a hotel on Booking.com is by using ratings. Obtained results showed that the average rating was 8.98 (the lowest rating given by the reviewers was 2.5, while the highest was 10). In order to investigate whether there were changes in satisfaction over time, average ratings were observed for each year separately. The results showed that the average rating in 2018 was 9.08, while in 2019 it was 8.97, showing a trend of a slight decline in satisfaction.

Figure 3: *Comparative analysis of the number of overnight stays of Chinese tourists*



Source: *Prepared by the authors*

In order to give a more detailed insight into changes in reviewers' satisfaction, 2020 is also included in the sample. Considering that for the year 2020, at the time of the research, there were only data for January and February, and since there are no data for January 2018, February was chosen as the reference month. The results showed that the decline in reviewers satisfaction, is also present in 2020 (Table 2).

Table 2: *Average ratings for February 2018-2020*

February	Year	Average rating
	2018	9.2
	2019	8.93
	2020	7.37

Source: *Author's calculation based on Booking.com reviews*

The literature review revealed that the location of the hotel has a great influence on the satisfaction of Chinese tourists. More specifically, hotels that are closer to the city center contribute to greater satisfaction than hotels located far from the city center. To determine whether the location of the hotel in this case also affects the satisfaction of Chinese tourists, an analysis was performed. Depending on the distance of the hotel, average ratings were compared. Observed hotels are from 0.1 to 4.1 km from the city

center. The results showed that the reviewers who stayed in hotels within 1 km of the city center were very satisfied with the hotel (average rating 9), while tourists who stayed in hotels 4 km away from the city center were much less satisfied (average rating 7.7).

In addition to ratings, tourists on Booking.com can write comments to further explain the reasons for their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. These comments were used to determine what had the greatest impact on the satisfaction of Chinese reviewers. Based on the text analysis, keywords were identified. In order to prepare a visual representation of the keywords that tourists used to express their satisfaction, word cloud was prepared (Figure 3). It can be seen that tourists most often used words such as good, comfortable, convenient, great and friendly while describing their satisfaction with the location, staff, breakfast, room and service.

Figure 4: *Word cloud of the keywords used in reviews to express satisfaction*



Source: *Prepared by the authors*

After positive expressions were identified, the same technique was used to investigate the cause of tourists' dissatisfaction (Figure 4). The reviewers were most dissatisfied with the room, breakfast, credit card, bathroom and facilities. To express their dissatisfaction, they most often used the words: small, old, uncomfortable, noisy and inconvenient.

Based on the results presented in Table 3, the hotels were divided into two almost equal groups. The first group consisted of hotels that the reviewers were less satisfied with in 2019 compared to 2018, while the second group consisted of hotels that the reviewers were more satisfied with in 2019 compared to 2018.

The first group consisted of eight hotels (Courtyard Belgrade City Center, Crowne Plaza, Holiday Inn Express Belgrade – City, Hyatt Regency Belgrade, Mama Shelter, Metropol Palace, Old Mill Belgrade, Sheraton Novi Sad).

To determine why the decline in satisfaction occurred, the keywords used by tourists in 2018 to express satisfaction, as well as the keywords used in 2019 to express dissatisfaction with the hotel, have been identified. The first five words with the highest number of repetitions are presented in the Table 4.

Table 4: *Identified keywords – Decline in satisfaction*

2018	Keywords – Positive		2019	Keywords – Negative	
		location			room
		staff			hotel
		hotel			breakfast
		service			staff
		breakfast			facilities

Source: *Prepared by the authors*

The second group included six hotels (Falkensteiner Hotel Belgrade, Hilton Belgrade, Mercure Belgrade Excelsior, My Place, Tulip Inn Putnik Belgrade) for which the keywords that reviewers used to express dissatisfaction in 2018 and satisfaction in 2019 are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: *Identified keywords – Increased satisfaction*

2018	Keywords – Negative		2019	Keywords – Positive	
		room			breakfast
		slippers			location
		bathrobes			staff
		sheets			clean
		breakfast			room

Source: *Prepared by the authors*

Discussion and conclusion

Nowadays, modern technologies are becoming an integral part of life around the world. Their benefits come primarily from the information that they are available to anyone at any time. Due to the inability to try the trip before purchasing, information plays a significant role for making travel decisions. Thus, these technologies have become very valuable source of information for potential tourists. Such benefits have been also recognized by numerous researchers in the field of tourism, who have used these technologies for the purpose of gaining different knowledge in the field of tourism (Au et al. 2014; Dimitrovski et al. 2019; Pavlović & Čelić, 2018; Seočanac & Čelić, 2019).

This study was conducted using data available on Booking.com. In order to gain insight into the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of Chinese tourists that stayed in one of the 14 hotels in Serbia that are operating within the international hotel brand, reviews were collected. Observed hotels are located in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš, so the study covered different parts of the country, as well as different hotel categories because 3- to 5-star hotels were included. A total of 249 reviews of these hotels have been published by reviewers from China. An analysis of the collected data showed that the number of tourists from China who have booked and reviewed some of these hotels on Booking.com increased from 2017 to 2019. Such results are in line with the data provided by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2020), which showed that the number of Chinese tourists in Serbia has increased significantly over the last few years. Review analysis also revealed that the largest number of Chinese tourists stayed at the Courtyard Belgrade City Center Hotel, which belongs to the Marriott International, which confirmed Liu et al. (2013) opinion that Chinese tourists in Europe prefer accommodation at Merriott hotels. Also, the results showed that they chose the 4- and 5-star hotels most, thus confirming the studies conducted by Raspor et al. (2016) and He et al. (2017).

Satisfaction of Chinese tourists was examined in two ways. Firstly, by using average ratings, which revealed that Chinese tourists were satisfied with the hotels, but that their satisfaction tended to decline slightly over the observed period. Secondly, by analyzing their comments, which provided a better understanding of the reasons that led to their dissatisfaction as well as satisfaction, it was discovered that they were most satisfied with the location, staff, breakfast, room and service, while they were most

dissatisfied with credit card payments, small rooms, lack of slippers in the room, and lack of toothpaste and toothbrushes in the bathroom. Such results confirmed some of the earlier studies (Au et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2008). It was interesting to investigate the reasons for the increase and decrease in the satisfaction of Chinese tourists. After the hotels were divided into two different groups, it became clear that the main cause of decline in satisfaction was small rooms, staff, breakfast and facilities, while breakfast, location near the city centre, cleanliness and spacious room, contributed to the increased satisfaction.

As this research has revealed what Chinese tourists are satisfied and dissatisfied with, they can further be used by managers of the observed hotels to enhance various aspects of their service, as well as travel agencies when preparing package tours for Chinese tourists. There are two limitations of the study. The first is that only guests who booked a hotel via Booking.com and wrote a review are included in the sample. The second is that the socio-demographic characteristics of the reviewers are unknown. Future research should include not only tourists who book these hotels via Booking.com, but other Chinese guests as well.

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