

# Chinese Tourists' View of Face and Tourism Consumption Behavior

Yaping Wang

School of Business and Management, Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Bengbu  
233000, China

## Abstract

Face is a uniquely Chinese socio-cultural concept and an important variable in understanding the daily life and consumption behavior of Chinese people. This paper analyses the face structure of Chinese tourists based on tourism contexts and, on the basis of exploring the mechanism of the role of face on tourism consumption, summarizes the specific manifestations of face consumption in tourism activities and the influence of face on different aspects of tourism consumption behavior, which is useful for understanding the face consumption culture of Chinese tourists.

## Keywords

Face; Face Consumption; Tourism Consumption; Identity.

## 1. Introduction

Face as a cultural and psychological phenomenon has long been rooted in Chinese society and is a major national characteristic of the Chinese people, profoundly influencing people's values and behavioral intentions [1]. One of the earliest discourses on Chinese face is found in the book *Chinese Characteristics* by the American missionary Smith [2], who argued that face has a very complex meaning for the Chinese, on a psychological level, and has a profound influence on Chinese habits. The Chinese scholar Hu Xianjin initiated the scholarly study of Chinese face, providing a more complete account of the intrinsic meaning, term usage and class attributes of face. According to Zhai, face is a psychological and behavioral aspect of being able to be looked up to by others due to the type of image an individual presents [3]. Zhou and He consider face as a public self-image or the image maintained in front of others, that is the overall perception that an individual develops in the minds of others [4]. Guo and Lin broadly divided the definition of face into two categories: the first category emphasizes face as a projection of an individual's social image in the minds of others, which is a psychological construct; the second emphasizes an individual's prestige and status in society, which is a social construct [1]. The psychological construction level is mainly the establishment of an individual's self-image and the presentation of self-image to others in society, while the social construction level is the recognition and appreciation from others that one reaps after the presentation of one's image, and is the process of forming one's status and prestige. In conclusion, face can be understood as one's image and reputation in society, representing how one is perceived and evaluated by others. It encompasses elements of personal dignity, self-esteem, and social recognition. Generally, there are two dimensions of face: external face and internal face. External face refers to how one is seen and evaluated by others, including aspects such as appearance, social status, and wealth. Internal face refers to one's self-assessment and self-esteem, encompassing aspects of self-worth and confidence. In Chinese society, face holds significant social significance. It is not only about personal self-respect and dignity but also relates to interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and social status. In Chinese culture, face is regarded as a form of social capital that aids individuals in establishing good interpersonal relationships, gaining social acceptance, and enhancing social standing.

In essence, face is an ideal state of affirmation and respect that individuals expect to achieve or maintain in their social activities, and its mechanism of action is identity management [5]. Identity is the degree to which people accept a certain status, image and role in society and the nature of their relationships with others [6]. In China as a Guanxi society, people construct their identity with interpersonal relationships at its core. This objective identification from others requires an expressive, observable and recognizable symbol, such as a specific consumption style or behavior, to be objectively identified [7]. Tourism consumption is a product of wealth and leisure, and is an important cultural consumption activity for the middle class nowadays. It has a different meaning and value to people's lives than ordinary physical consumption [8], and has become a way and means for people to pursue identity, express themselves and thus gain face or avoid losing face [9]. So how are tourists' face structures in tourism consumption contexts, and are they different from general physical consumption? What kind of influence does tourists' need for face have on tourism consumption behavior, and what is the mechanism of action of this influence? What are the specific manifestations of face culture in tourism consumption? Based on the above questions, this paper explores and collates the characteristics and manifestations of tourists' face consumption behavior by combing through the relevant literature.

## 2. The Face Attributes of Tourism Consumption Behavior

The choices of tourist destinations, travel methods, and travel products can, to some extent, reflect the social status, economic power, taste, and personal image of travelers, having certain face attributes. Specifically, the manifestations are as follows.

Firstly, the choice of tourist destination is associated with face attributes in tourism consumption. Opting for popular and upscale tourist destination showcases one's taste and pursuits. For example, selecting renowned international tourist attractions like Paris, New York, or the Maldives demonstrates a global perspective and an elegant lifestyle, earning others' admiration and recognition.

Secondly, the travel method chosen plays a role. Opting for luxurious travel modes, such as private chartered flights, luxury cruises, or customized travel experiences, showcases personal financial strength and a taste for luxury. Conversely, choosing backpacking, self-guided tours, or budget travel may be regarded as indications of lower economic conditions or a lack of concern for face.

Thirdly, accommodation choices make a difference. Opting for high-end hotels, resorts, or private villas as accommodation demonstrates personal wealth and taste. On the contrary, choosing budget hotels or youth hostels may be seen as indicators of poorer financial conditions or a lack of concern for face.

Fourthly, dining expenditure matters. Choosing upscale restaurants, specialty eateries, or enjoying the service of a private chef showcases a pursuit for gastronomy and taste. Conversely, choosing fast-food chains or street food might be perceived as having lower standards or a lack of concern for quality.

Fifthly, shopping choices have an impact. Purchasing products from luxury brands, designer clothing, or jewelry showcases personal economic power and taste. Conversely, opting for inexpensive goods or disregarding brands may be seen as a lack of concern for face or reflecting lower financial conditions.

Lastly, showcasing on social media matters. Travel consumption behaviors can exhibit one's face within their social circle. Sharing travel photos and experiences on social media showcases one's travel experiences and taste, enhancing a sense of identity and admiration within the social circle. By displaying luxurious travel experiences on social media, individuals can garner more attention and appreciation.

In summary, tourism consumption behaviors, including destination choices, method selections, and social media showcase, possess certain face attributes. These attributes reflect the pursuit of social recognition, the display of personal financial strength and social status, as well as the fulfillment of self-worth and social needs during the consumption process.

### 3. Representation of Face in Tourism Consumption Behavior

Tourism face consumption refers to the tourism consumption activities carried out by consumers out of constructing and displaying self-image or pursuing group and social identity [10]. Based on this connotation, the performance of face in tourism consumption behavior is divided into four categories with reference to the previous study by Wu and Tao [7].

The first is the tourism consumption conspicuous type. To understand this type of tourism consumption, the connotation of conspicuous consumption needs to be clear. Veblen first introduced the concept of conspicuous consumption as a way and means for individuals to demonstrate social status and maintain fame by purchasing expensive, publicly visible products [11]. Conceptually, it can be seen that conspicuous consumption functions more on the social meaning behind the act of consumption, as a specific and important act of identity. The ostentatious consumption behaviors implemented by tourists in tourism activities are shown in six major parts: food, accommodation, transportation, travel, shopping, entertainment [12], in which tourists pursue symbolic symbolism by generating a large number of unique and high consumption behavior in order to manifest their status and position [13], such as Chinese tourists tend to choose upscale luxury hotels and resorts to showcase their economic prowess and taste; purchasing luxury goods, designer clothing, and branded accessories are also common face-oriented consumption behaviors among Chinese tourists, aiming to display their social status and success; indulging in gourmet experiences at high-end restaurants not only allows them to enjoy exquisite cuisine but also serves as a means to demonstrate their taste and pursuit of a luxurious lifestyle, thereby gaining face.

Secondly, tourism consumption is conformity type. Conformity is "the behavior or attitude of a subject that is consistent with the object because of the influence of the object" [14], and is the result of individuals imitating others or gaining the approval of others [15]. Conformity also exists in tourism activities, which refers to the phenomenon of tourists staying in line with the majority in their tourism decisions or tourism activities when they are under external pressure [16], for example, in following the trend of travelling to popular tourist destinations, buying trendy tourism goods, choosing similar travel times. Although this behavior may face price increases, crowdedness and tight accommodation, in order to avoid being looked down upon and gaining the approval of others, tourists would rather reduce the quality of their travels, but also to save face and create herd consumption.

Thirdly, the individualistic nature of tourism consumption. As research into consumer perceptions of face continues, scholars have pointed out that face is no longer limited to the boasting of external status, power and achievement, but that the expression of one's personality is also a way for consumers to maintain and improve their face [17]. The increasing number of travelers nowadays aspire for individuality and self-expression, seeking to differentiate themselves from the masses by pursuing alternative forms of travel that bestow a sense of superiority and allow for the cultivation of one's own reputation. Such endeavors include selecting offbeat destinations, partaking in exhilarating and unconventional tourism activities, and embracing distinctive modes of travel. Moreover, bespoke travel experiences have gained considerable popularity, with options like private chartered flights and luxury cruises offering opportunities to showcase one's exclusive treatment and privileged status.

Fourthly, the blind tourism consumption. The prevalence of consumerism has led to consumption no longer for the satisfaction of practical survival needs in the traditional sense,

but for the satisfaction of desires stimulated by modern culture, and this has led to the creation of much unnecessary consumption. In this context of consumption, it has also pushed tourists to produce blind tourism consumption behavior, specifically irrational consumption decisions and behaviors made by tourists who do not consider income constraints, or do not pursue actual economic utility, or make inadequate judgements about the objects of tourism consumption [7], such as Chinese tourists buying large quantities of high-end fashion and designer cosmetics when travelling abroad.

All in all, face-oriented consumption plays a significant role in tourism, as tourists exhibit their economic power and social status through choices like luxury hotels, purchasing branded goods, and indulging in gourmet cuisine. In doing so, they not only seek personal validation but also gain societal recognition and respect.

#### 4. The Face Structure of Tourists

According to Guo, there are four dimensions of tourists' face structure, which are consumption-oriented, cultural capital-oriented, relational interaction-oriented and personality manifestation-oriented [8].

Firstly, the consumption-oriented type stems from the fact that tourists generate higher consumption in the process of tourism. The connotation of the consumption-based face structure is similar to that of the aforementioned conspicuous tourism consumption, which refers to tourists' participation in tourism activities and tourism consumption behaviors at high prices in order to express their personal status, position and taste, such as staying in five-star hotels and choosing luxury cruises, which are extravagant and scarce for the general consumer group, and it is because of this luxury and scarcity that the tourists feel privileged. It is therefore clear that the competition for consumption in tourism contexts has not only not ceased, but has become more pronounced.

Secondly, cultural capitalism is related to the tourists' diverse and informed experiences. The richness of the experience broadens the tourists' horizons, increases his or her knowledge, and all experiences internalized in the heart, providing the possibility of accumulating cultural capital. Cultural capital can reveal the richness of the tourists' insights, diverse experiences and unique opinions, allowing the tourist to develop a psychological and behavioral advantage and to be recognized by others in social interactions, thus constituting a dimension of the tourist's face.

Thirdly, relational interactions stem from the harmonious interpersonal relationships that tourists build with others during their travels, manifested in accompanying family members on trips and shopping for friends and relatives. China is a relational society that focuses on maintaining relationships with family and friends, which is why most Chinese tourists travel in groups, and it is seen as dignified to shop for family and friends and accompany them during their travels, thereby enhancing their relationships and maintaining social ties.

Fourthly, the individuality of the traveler stems from his or her unique and distinctive travel activities. In acquaintance societies, due to the 'homogeneity' of lifestyles, too much consumption is used to show that one is different from others and may be isolated and rejected [6]. With the development of modernization and urbanization, the high mobility of the city has challenged the acquaintance society, and the characteristics of the semi-acquaintance and semi-familiar society have begun to emerge. In this context, consumption that is different from that of others becomes a symbol to identify one's taste, attitude and philosophy. In travel time, the tourist expresses his or her individuality, expresses his or her identity and gains recognition in this way by participating in unique and non-conformist tourism activities, which are related to the acquisition of the tourists' face.

## 5. The Mechanism of Face Effect on Tourism Consumption: Identity

Identity is a sociological concept that refers to people's positioning of themselves and their relationships with others, as well as the process of identifying and classifying others socially. Face is a desire and pursuit of identity, and identity is a benefit pursued by face [7]. In the process of social interaction, individual identification involves both internal and external aspects. Internal identification refers to the subjective self-identity (self-image) of individuals, while external identification refers to the classification and comprehensive evaluation of individuals by society (public image). In addition, identification also has a subjective and objective distinction. Subjective identification refers to the identification that individuals are aware of subjectively, while objective identification refers to the objective characteristics, symbols, and symbols that reflect and display human social identity, such as skin color, dialect, habits, customs, and lifestyle. As a perceptible appearance and clue, objective identity has become a symbol and symbol that reveals people's social identity. On the one hand, people use objective symbols (such as clothing, language, residential form, location, food, etc.) to express their identity. On the other hand, people also classify others socially by observing the symbolic clues displayed by others [6].

Unlike Westerners who build identity based on individual independent personality and self-concept, Chinese people build self-identity through interpersonal relationships. The reaction of others who have relationships with the individual in social interactions is an important prerequisite for individuals to accept and generate a sense of identity [5]. When the reaction of others is negative or negative, the individual will be in a situation of lacking identification from others, and thus unable to obtain the face sought by identification, that is, falling into an anxious state of losing face and losing face. Therefore, Chinese people pay more attention to their own external and objective identity, and focus on using tangible objects to establish identity with others and convey a sense of identity. Consumption, as an individual's explicit behavior, to a certain extent reflects certain attributes and characteristics related to the individual. It is not only the raw material used by the individual to construct identity, but also the signs and symbols of identity expression. Others who have relationships with the consumer will show respect or contempt based on the behavior of the consumer, thereby affecting the gains and losses of individual identity and face. In the field of tourism consumption, the purpose of tourism is no longer simply to relax and relax. Tourists are eager to express and convey their self-identity through the process of tourism consumption, adopting different consumption forms and purchasing different material products, which is a way for tourists to shape their self-image and seek identity. Tourists construct self-identity and group identity through consumption behaviors that distinguish them from others or attribute themselves to a certain group, thereby achieving the goals of competing for, preserving, and avoiding losing face. For example, the existence of herd tourism consumption is, on the one hand, the result of tourists following the crowd and simply imitating others. On the other hand, tourists face the pressure of social norms and have to engage in consumption activities in order not to be excluded from the group, which is an important way for tourists to obtain group identity.

## 6. The Influence of Tourists' Face on Consumer Behavior

### 6.1. Impact on Tourism Consumption Level

Face to a certain extent symbolizes an individual's social status and reputation. Consumers sometimes have to obtain and protect face by consuming certain products. People who purchase expensive, big-brand products are generally considered to have relatively strong economic strength. Buying these products can demonstrate their status and identity to society, enabling them to gain face perception. Due to the consideration of "saving face" and not "losing

face", tourists may prefer to purchase some publicly visible products during tourism [18], such as international famous brands and luxury goods. These products may not be of high quality, but they have a high brand awareness and strong status display tendency, and their prices will also be more expensive compared to each other. There may even be tourists who, in order to improve their own status, produce blind consumption that does not match their own identity and status, causing them to fall into the dilemma of "playing fat with a swollen face" and "dying to lose face and suffer".

## 6.2. Impact on Tourism Consumption Patterns

With the development of the economy and the change of concepts, tourism activities are no longer the privilege of a few people, and the tourism consumer groups are becoming increasingly diverse. At the same time, the needs of tourists are becoming increasingly diverse. In order to meet the diverse needs of tourists, many new tourism methods have been formed, such as cruise tourism, adventure tourism, volunteer travel, camping, RV tourism, and so on. Tourists hope to differentiate themselves by adopting differentiated tourism methods, so that others can form a unique understanding of themselves, and gain recognition from others. This will make tourists feel proud. Therefore, in order to achieve the ideal state of recognition and respect from others, tourists may choose to express their own identity and gain recognition from others by choosing their own recognized travel methods.

## 6.3. Impact on Tourism Consumption Space

Face is a social and cultural concept that cannot be separated from the social background and is related to individual social needs, not individual personal needs. Therefore, different scenarios have different impacts on tourism consumption behavior. In private spaces, tourists focus more on the practicality and quality of their products. In public spaces, tourists take into account the views of others and begin to focus on explicit factors such as the appearance, brand, and price of products. Consumer behavior is easily affected by face. In two types of spaces where tourists travel alone and accompanied by others, being accompanied by others may cause tourists to purchase products that are not needed or whose prices exceed expectations in order to save face. In addition, in the selection of tourism destination space, in order to gain face, tourists may choose well-known and popular cities or scenic spots, and may also choose some niche and unique tourism destinations to highlight themselves and convey identity.

## 6.4. Impact on Tourism Consumption Motivations

Face consciousness also affects the travel motives of tourists. Tourists choose their destinations and travel products based on personal interests and preferences. However, there are also some tourists who may select a specific destination or travel experience with the intention of showcasing their travel experiences on social media, seeking the admiration and recognition of others. In this case, travel consumption is perceived by tourists as a form of social capital, aimed at enhancing their status within their social circles.

## 7. Conclusion

This article examines the literature related to face culture and tourism consumption, and finds that there are four types of face structures for Chinese tourists: consumption based, cultural capital, relational communication, and personality manifestation. Face affects tourists' consumption behavior through identity, and different dimensions of face structures constitute different face identities for tourists, which in turn manifest different face consumption behaviors.

There is indeed a certain relationship between face and travel consumption, but this relationship should be viewed correctly. In reality, face-consciousness can to some extent

stimulate the emergence of new travel consumption demands, as well as regulate and constrain the behavior of tourists, playing a positive role. However, travel consumption is not solely driven by face. It is an activity of enjoyment and experiences, where travelers choose destinations and products based on their own interests, preferences, and needs. The purpose of travel is to relax, broaden horizons, enrich knowledge, and experience culture, rather than just showcasing social status. If travelers become overly concerned with face in travel consumption, it not only hinders their personal development but also creates unnecessary psychological pressure and financial burdens. Moreover, it may lead to the development of unethical tourism products and destructive construction in order to meet the face-oriented demands of tourists. Therefore, it is important to have a balanced perspective on the relationship between face and travel consumption, taking into account both individual social needs and the true meaning of travel. Travelers can choose their travel style based on their preferences, satisfying their face-related desires while genuinely enjoying the pleasures and rewards of travel. At the same time, it is important to respect the diverse choices individuals make in travel consumption, not judging based on face but rather focusing on the intrinsic value and meaning of travel itself.

## References

- [1] Guo X L, Lin D R. A literature review of face consciousness and local consumer behavior in China, *Foreign Economics and Management*, Vol, 37(2015) No.11, p.63-71.
- [2] Smith A H. *Chinese Characteristics* (Shu Yang, et al trans. Taiyuan: Shuhai Publishing House, China 2004), p.1-20.
- [3] Zhai X W. *The Logic of Chinese Action* (Beijing: Social Science Literature Press, China 2001).
- [4] Chou M L, Ho D Y F. An analysis of meaning and work of face in social interaction from the cross-cultural perspectives, *Chinese Social Psychological Review*, (2006) No.01, p.186-216.
- [5] Qi H F, Research on the face problem in Chinese consumer behavior, *Journal of Hubei University (Philosophy and Social Science)*, Vol, 36(2009) No.01, p.120-125.
- [6] Wang N. Consumption and identity: An exploration of an analytical framework for consumer sociology, *Sociological Studies*, (2001) No.01, p.4-14.
- [7] Wu J H, Tao D Y. On the relationship between "Face" culture and tourism consumption behavior, *Economic Research Guide*, (2010) No.22, p.167-169.
- [8] Guo X L. The structure of face on Chinese tourists: An exploratory study. *Human Geography*, Vol, 30(2015)No.01, p.122-128.
- [9] Zhang C J, Bai K. A study on the effect of face need on tourist inappropriate behavior, *Tourism Tribune*, Vol, 30(2015) No.12, p.55-65.
- [10] Li R Y. A research on the impact of Chinese tourists' self-construal on face consumption behaviors, *Tourism Science*, Vol, 32(2018) No.05, p.30-43.
- [11] Vbelen T. *The Theory of the leisure class*, *History of Economic Thought Books*, (1899).
- [12] He K. Research on the impact of conspicuous consumption on tourist experience, *Journal of Liaoning University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, Vol, 17(2015) No.05, p.12-15.
- [13] Zhou Q. Research on the high consumption behavior of Chinese outbound tourists and its causes, *Consumer Economics*, Vol, 29(2013) No.01, p.75-78.
- [14] Song G D. A new view on conformability, *Psychological Science*, (2005) No.05, p.1174-1178.
- [15] Cialdini R B, Goldstein N J. Social influence: Compliance and conformity, *Annual Review of Psychology*, (2004) No.55, p.591-621.
- [16] Jiang L J. On the group action of Chinese college students in tourism, *Journal of Yunnan Minzu University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (2008) No.02, p.70-73.

- [17] Wang C Z, Cui N. Unique consumption or status consumption: How face values and identity-fit values influence the symbolic consumer-brand relationship, *Economic Management*, Vol, 33(2011) No.06, p.84-90.
- [18] Wong N Y, Ahuvia A C. Personal taste and family face: Luxury consumption in Confucian and Western societies, *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol, 15(1998) No.5, p.423-441.