

Balneotherapy for fun: chinese tourists in hot spring destination

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Abstract

China's recent hot spring projects have been developed to attract tourism. Instead of inheriting the medical traditions such as balneotherapy in nursing homes in China since the 1950s, these programs are mainly aimed at attracting group tourists. As a result, many Chinese hot spring projects only regard the health effect of hot spring as a propaganda means, but do not actually develop the products of hot spring convalescence. Visitors cannot realize the medical benefits of balneotherapy at such hot spring destinations, nor do they have the opportunity to experience balneotherapy. China's health insurance system does not include balneotherapy, which leads visitors to pay for all balneotherapy themselves. This limits the development of balneotherapy in China and makes the operation of existing hot spring sanatorium facing great difficulties.

Palabras claves: hot spring, balneotherapy, China

Balneoterapia para diversión: turistas chinos en destinos de aguas termales

Resumen

Los proyectos recientes de aguas termales de China se han desarrollado para atraer el turismo. En lugar de heredar las tradiciones médicas como balneoterapia en clínicas privadas en China desde la década de 1950, estos programas están dirigidos principalmente a atraer turistas en grupo. Como resultado, muchos proyectos chinos de aguas termales solo consideran el efecto de salud de las aguas termales como un medio de propaganda, pero en realidad no desarrollan los productos de aguas termales para convalecientes. Los visitantes no pueden darse cuenta de los beneficios médicos de la balneoterapia en estos destinos de aguas termales, ni tienen la oportunidad de experimentar la balneoterapia. El sistema de seguro de salud de China no incluye la balneoterapia, lo que lleva a los visitantes a pagar por ellos mismos toda la balneoterapia. Esto limita el desarrollo de la balneoterapia en China y hace que el funcionamiento del sanatorio de aguas termales existente se enfrente a grandes dificultades.

Key words: aguas termales, balneoterapia, China

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THE HISTORY OF CHINA'S BALNEOTHERAPY

As early as the records “the flowing hot spring, washes away the filth, drives away evil spirits, and returns to the right way” of Ode of Hot Spring by Zhang Heng in the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Commentary on the Waterways Classic by Li Daoyuan in the Northern Wei Dynasty, there have been 31 records of hot spring in China, among which Lushan Mountain Hot Spring and Taiyi Mountain (Zhongnan Mountain) Hot Spring have detailed description of curative effect. Because of the its health benefits, hot spring bathing went into the residence of the upper ruling class. Many hot spring areas became temporary residence of the royal family, while the public use of hot spring was rarely recorded in the official history. For example, the Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi wrote Everlasting Regret, saying that “granted shower in Huaqing Pool in cold spring, with slippery hot spring water washing her silky skin.” Although the beauty effect of the hot spring was clear, what impressed the world was the political marriage of Imperial Concubine Yang. In the 14th century, the Mongols established a vast empire across Eurasia, and the Chinese and Western civilizations had an unprecedented intersection.

Western balneotherapy has entered China for the first time. According to archaeological discovery, the remaining Yude Hall in The Palace Museum in Beijing was built in the Yuan Dynasty, built by Byzantine craftsmen at that time. Its architectural form was influenced by the Roman spa, which became the historical witness of the introduction of balneotherapy from the West into China. However, the sinicization of this only combination of Chinese and western balneotherapy was only used by the imperial palace of the Yuan Dynasty and it was not popularized in Chinese society after all. When the empire that unites Eurasia is gone, Yude Hall is forgotten gradually in the humble corner of Palace Museum.

Influenced by the revival of western balneotherapy in the 19th century, Chinese warlords and senior officials built a number of hot spring accommodations throughout the country during the Republican period, such as Tangshan in Nanjing, Tanggangzi in Liaoning and Conghua hot spring. Unlike in the west, balneotherapy in China attaches great importance to the theory of natural health and neglects the development of water quality, medical facilities and complementary therapies. For example, the Pearl River Nursing Home built in the Conghua hot spring in the

Republican period was named as the place of heavenly medicine, with an inscription of “a disease cannot be cured by medicine, but only by heaven”, which means to restore health through the efficacy of the natural environment.

From 1950s to 1970s, China began the construction trend of nursing homes. More than 1,500 nursing homes of all kinds were set up in the 1960s, many of which are hot spring sanatoriums. At this stage, Chinese hot spring sanatorium introduced relatively completed balneotherapy from the Soviet Union and became an important part of the national medical system. However, as the institutional reform in the 1990s was gradually pushed forward, the state's financial support for nursing homes gradually decreased, and a large number of nursing homes closed down due to the lack of patients. The development of balneotherapy in China fell into a low ebb again.

Reform and opening-up in 1980s drove the redevelopment of hot spring tourist destinations in China. According to the China Hot Spring Association, there were 2,538 hot spring enterprises in China (excluding Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan) as of 2017. In 2017, the total number of hot spring tourists reached 770 million, and the total revenue of national hot spring enterprises reached 242.83 billion yuan. China's hot spring tourism has experienced rapid growth in the past 30 years. Many new hot spring projects include the hot spring pool, water park, restaurant and high-end hotel, and balneotherapy has been preserved in many hot spring projects. However, what do China's vast tourist population think of balneotherapy, and what do they do with their consumption in modern hot springs, all of which are worthy of attention.

METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

From May to July 2017, the China Hot Spring Association selected 26 representative hot spring enterprises in Beijing, Chongqing, Guangdong Province, Shandong Province, Fujian Province, Jiangsu Province, Guangxi Province, Hunan Province, Liaoning Province, Hebei Province and Hubei Province, and distributed 2,600 questionnaires for tourists, and recovered 1,938 valid questionnaires, with an effective rate of 74.5%. The questionnaire surveys the basic personal information of tourists and the consumption behavior of visiting hot spring destinations.

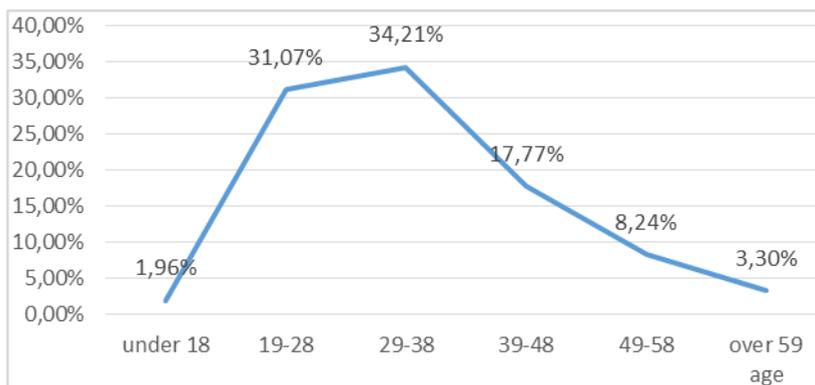
RESULTS

Basic characteristics of visitors

According to the questionnaire results of hot spring tourists, among the age structure of tourists in China's hot spring tourism market in 2017, young consumers aged 29 to 38 accounted for the largest proportion, reaching 34.21%; the proportion of consumers aged 19 to 28 was not far from the former, accounting for 31.07%;

consumers aged 39 to 48 took the third place, accounting for 17.77% of the total; the proportion of middle-aged consumers aged 49 to 58 was far different from the former, accounting for 8.24%; the number of elderly consumers over 59 was less, only 3.30%; the proportion of young consumers under the age of 18 was the smallest, with only 1.96% (Figure 1). The change of age structure is not very big, and generally similar to the structure in recent years. The young and middle-aged are the main force of travel. 65.28% of the visitors are aged between 19 and 38.

Figure 1 - Age structure of Chinese hot spring tourists



The main consumer group is families with children

According to the results of the visitor survey, in the Chinese hot spring tourism market in 2017, more than half of the total tourists were married with children, accounting for 59.94%; the proportion of unmarried consumers was lower than that of married consumers with children, which was 33.01%; the proportion of married consumers without children was the smallest, at 7.05% (Figure 2). It can be seen that most of the hot spring tourists are already economically independent and have established families with independent consumption capacity. Families in China tend to be small. In 2017, a family of three consisting of parents and one child accounted for the highest proportion of families, with 82% in urban areas and 55% in rural areas. Smaller Chinese families have better consumption ability. In addition, the implementation of the two-child policy in China also means that the consumption structure of hot spring tourism, which is mainly married with children, will still be the main trend in the future.

Behavior characteristics of hot spring tourists

Per capita hot spring bath number is up to 4 times/year

According to the results of the questionnaire, the mainstream of the hot spring tourism market is tourists taking hot spring bath for more than 4 times a year, accounting for 32.82%; followed by the number of the first time visitors to hot

springs, accounting for 20.23%; the third time visitors and the second time visitors account for 19.14% and 18.99% of the total number of visitors respectively; at the bottom of the list is the number of the fourth time visitors, with only 8.82% (Figure 3).

Figure 2 - Family structure of Chinese hot spring tourists

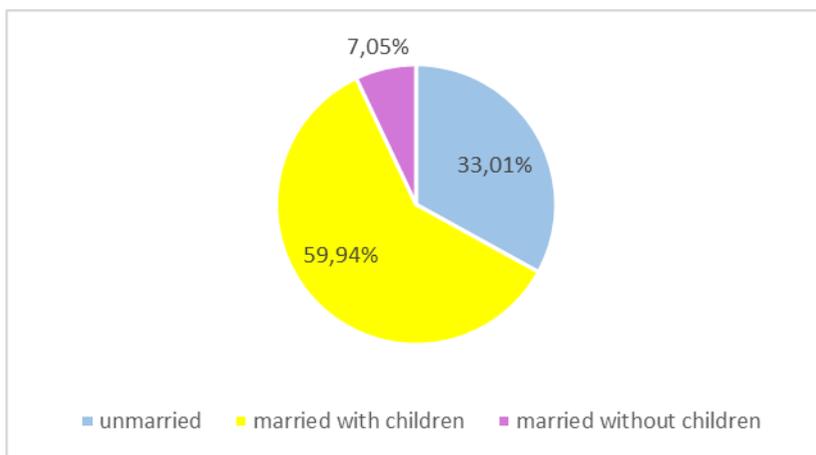
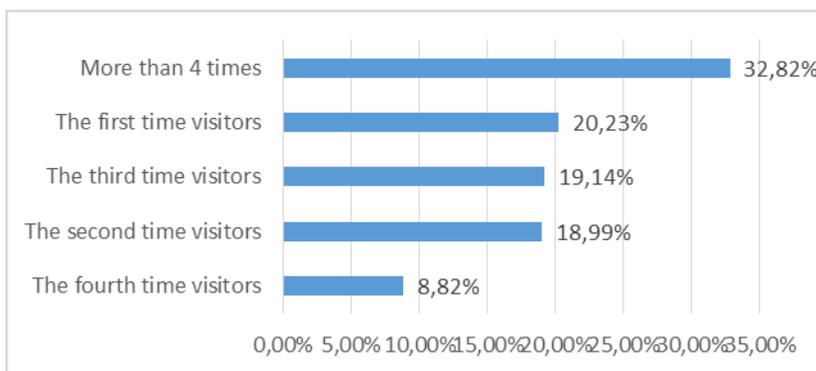


Figure 3 - Revisiting rates for Chinese hot spring visitors



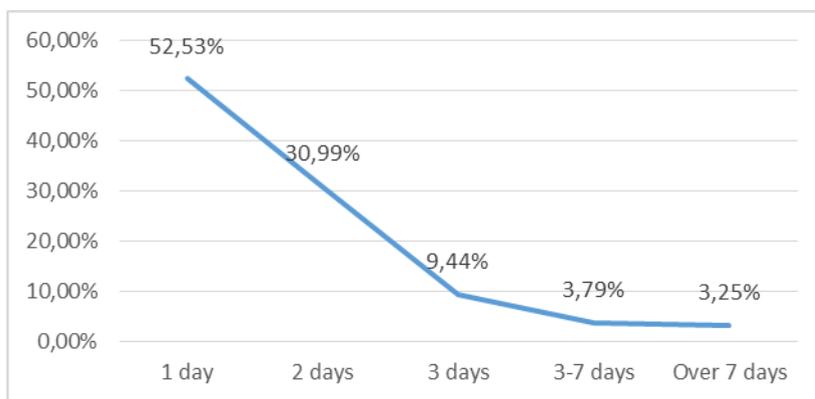
This shows that the repeat tourists of Hot springs account for the overwhelming majority. The number of tourists with two or more bathing in hot spring accounts for 79.77% of the total number of tourists surveyed, which indicates that China's hot spring industry has a good market foundation, and the common people have gradually formed the consumption habit of hot spring entertainment and vacation. On the other hand, the market demand potential of initial tourists of hot spring tourism is not small. It is the next challenge and opportunity for hot spring enterprises to

deeply explore and meet the market demand of these customers and make it a new central force.

Visitors mainly take short trips for one to two days

The proportion of Chinese hot spring tourists who choose to stay for one day is the highest, accounting for 52.53%; followed by the proportion of tourists stay for two days, accounting for 30.99%. The two add up to 83.52%, indicating that a stay of one to two days is the choice of most visitors. Among the remaining options, the proportion of visitors stay for three days accounts for 9.44%; the proportion of visitors stay for three to seven days is 3.78%; the number of visitors stay for over seven days is the lowest, at 3.25% (Figure 4). It can be seen that Chinese hot spring tourists mainly consume in the hot spring area on weekends. As a result of the introduction of the national statutory short holiday policy, the majority of tourists mainly take short trips, focusing on hot springs around.

Figure 4 - Length of stay for Chinese hot spring tourists



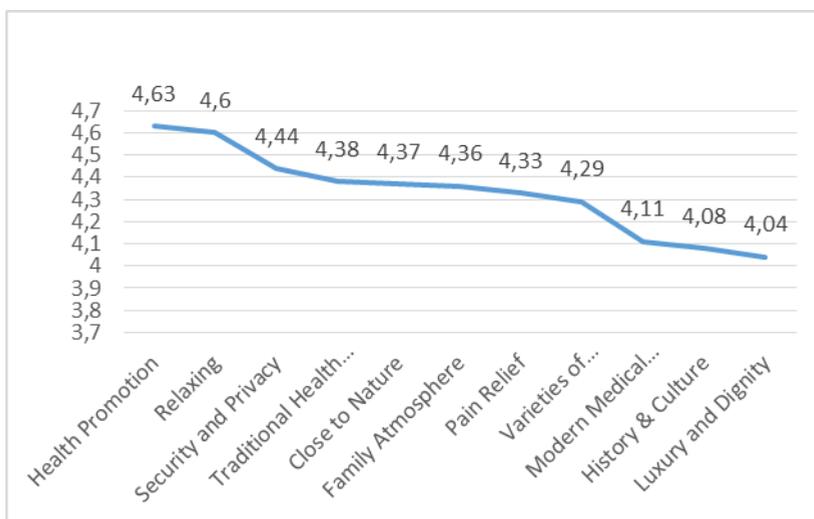
The average cost of a hot spring tour is 677.43 yuan

The average per capita consumption of hot spring bath for tourists is 677.43 yuan, with the highest per capita consumption of 20,000 yuan and the lowest of 42.86 yuan. The difference in per capita consumption level between different hot spring projects is large. 55.80% of hot spring tourists spend less than 677.43 yuan on average, while 44.20% of hot spring tourists spend more than 677.43 yuan on average. This indicates that the hot spring tourism market is increasingly differentiated, and some tourists have higher consumption capacity and higher requirements for the hot spring project facilities. Others will not spend more on hot springs.

Promoting health and relaxing are the main purposes of hot spring tourists

According to the questionnaire results, tourists believe that the value of promoting health and relaxing in hot springs are the most important, with an important score of 4.63 and 4.6 respectively. Secondly, the tourists consider the security and privacy of the hot spring is also more important, with a score of 4.44. The value of experiencing traditional health preservation and getting close to nature are relatively important, with the scores of 4.38 and 4.37 respectively. The score of feeling family atmosphere and effective pain relief are 4.36 and 4.33, higher than the average score of importance level (Figure 5). It can be seen that relaxing the body and mind and promoting health are the main motives of most hot spring tourists, who believe that hot spring bathing is a way of recreation and health maintenance. Therefore, hot spring enterprises should pay attention to this consumer demand.

Figure 5 - The main purpose of Chinese tourists to visit hot springs

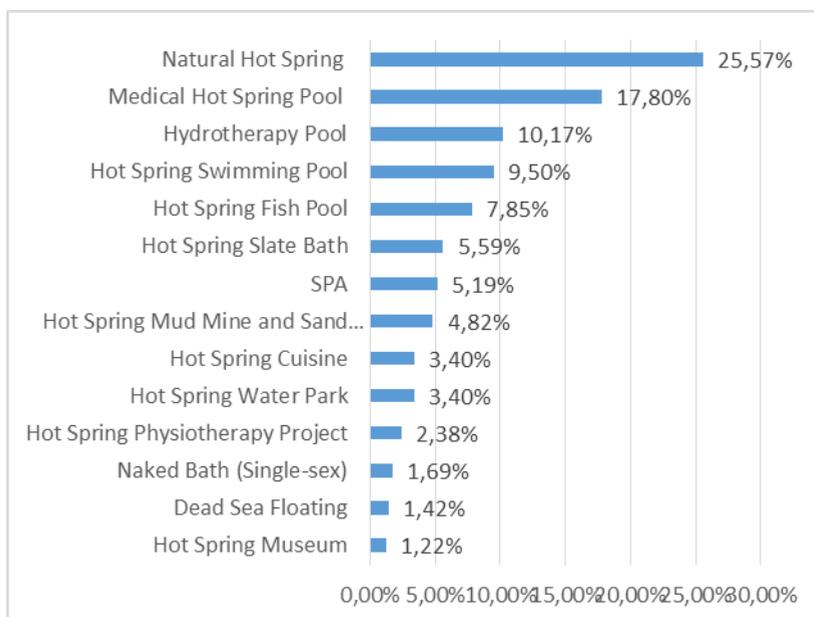


Behavior characteristics of hot spring tourists

The results of the questionnaire show that tourists who prefer natural hot spring take up 25.57%. Secondly, the proportion of tourists who prefer to experience the medical hot spring pool (add materials such as traditional Chinese medicine, petal, tea, wine and milk, etc.) is 17.80%. The percentage of people who like hydrotherapy pool (such as strike, bubble, whirlpool, etc.) is similar to the percentage who like hot spring swimming pool, at 10.17% and 9.50%, respectively. The proportion of tourists who like hot spring slate bath is 5.59%. At the same time, some tourists express their love for SPA, accounting for 5.19% of the total number of tourists surveyed. Moreover, the hot spring mud mine and sand bath and the hot spring

water park are also favored by a few tourists, the proportion is 4.82% and 3.40%, respectively. Other hot spring facilities, such as naked bath, the Dead Sea floating and hot spring museum, are less popular with tourists (Figure 6).

Figure 6 - The hot spring products that visitors enjoy most



Most Chinese tourists have a special preference for natural hot spring pools, and they have a high interest in experiencing the original nature of natural hot spring. Therefore, Chinese hot spring enterprises should show more characteristics of natural ecology in the design, so that tourists can experience more natural ecological elements in products.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

China's hot spring tourism has a large market size and has formed a relatively stable consumption pattern. Tourists' consumption of hot springs is fundamentally based on the demand for health and relaxation. Especially in the context of China's increasing urbanization, young urban working group and affluent urban families are looking for places to spend their weekends for leisure and relaxation.

Because many provinces in China have hot spring resources, it is a natural choice for urban people. However, Chinese hot spring tourists do not pay much attention to the medical effect of hot spring. They consume hot spring resources in the way of entertainment and relaxation. As a result, Chinese consumers will not

stay in hot springs for too long, nor will they be able to truly recover in a short time. They only seek a short period of entertainment and leisure at the hot spring destination.

There are two main reasons for this result:

First, China's recent hot spring projects have been developed to attract tourism. Instead of inheriting the medical traditions such as balneotherapy in nursing homes in China since the 1950s, these programs are mainly aimed at attracting group tourists. As a result, many Chinese hot spring projects only regard the health effect of hot spring as a propaganda means, but do not actually develop the products of hot spring convalescence. Visitors cannot realize the medical benefits of balneotherapy at such hot spring destinations, nor do they have the opportunity to experience balneotherapy.

Second, China's health insurance system does not include balneotherapy, which leads visitors to pay for all balneotherapy themselves. This limits the development of balneotherapy in China and makes the operation of existing hot spring sanatorium facing great difficulties. Many of China's hot-spring nursing homes have been forced to reform, gone bust or been privately purchased and turned into recreational hot spring events in the last 30 years.

Therefore, if China's medical insurance system cannot be reformed to absorb balneotherapy into its reimbursement program, China's hot spring program will continue to focus on short-term tourists as the main source market, and medical projects such as balneotherapy will not have more attraction to Chinese tourists than leisure and entertainment programs.