Social Media Tourism Marketing in China

Dialogue between Wolfgang Georg Arlt and Jens Thraenhart

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Georg Arlt is professor for tourism management at the West Coast University of Applied Sciences in Germany and director of the COTRI China Outbound Tourism Research Institute. Having a background of practical experience with organizing Chinese group travel in Europe in the 1990s, he has however for the last decade analyzed the Chinese outbound tourism development from an academic point of view. As part of his research on the specifics of the Chinese culture and Chinese consumer behaviour, Social Media has become an increasingly important part of the question of how to communicate successfully with the Chinese tourism source market.

Jens Thraenhart holds an MBA title from the Cornell University and has been working in the hospitality and tourism business for a number of years, in leading roles heading digital marketing and customer relationship management for organizations including the Canadian Tourism Commission and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, before moving to China. He looks at the Chinese tourism source market from a background of a deep engagement with Social Media and multi-cultural relevant marketing, transferring the general insights towards the specific Chinese situation.

So instead of an academic paper, they decided to communicate their facts and arguments in the form of a dialogue.

JT: The starting point for Social Media tourism marketing in China is the fact, that with over 420 million Internet users and 92% social media engagement, the Internet has become the most influential medium in China, outpacing all other countries, as reported in the Digital Influence Index 2010. Popular sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have fallen victim to the Great Firewall of China and are blocked in China; but local Internet companies have filled this gap and unequivocally rule the digital space. According to the Nielsen Outbound Travel Report 2009, Chinese consumers use the Internet as a research tool more than any other medium. E-commerce, while still small, is growing rapidly for travel purchases.

WGA: For China’s outbound tourism, similarly impressive numbers are catching the interest of destination marketing organizations and private tourism service providers around the world. Especially the first decade of the 21st century has seen a tremendous growth. In 2010 more than 50 million border crossing from
Mainland China will be recorded, within the new decade China will develop from their current position as the number four international tourism source market to the top position, which is occupied by Germany today. Instead of the now about 6%, Chinese will be responsible for more than 10% of the total number of travellers and the total amount of money spent on international tourism.

JT: This is even more astonishing if we take into account that there is apparently no tradition of outbound travelling in China.

WGA: ‘Travelling for one thousand li equals reading ten thousand volumes of books’ has been a commonly accepted truth for many centuries in China. outbound travel to areas beyond the realm of the Han culture, however, had no tradition in Imperial China, with the exception of some monks travelling to India to fetch Buddhist scriptures in the first millennium and the voyages of Zheng He, the Chinese Columbus to Africa in the 15th century. China has neither a Marco Polo like the European nor an Ibn Battuta like the Muslim world, travelling to find adventures and riches or looking for brothers in faith. Xu Xiake, the famous Ming Dynasty geographer, spent 30 years travelling in China but saw no reason to leave the country.

In the 20th century, first turmoil and wars prevented the development of outbound travelling for other reasons than emigration, to be followed by a policy of frugality in the first three decades of the People’s Republic of China.

Since the beginning of the “Opening and Reform” policy in 1978 the wish to see the outside world has been growing ever stronger. Nevertheless the proportion of Chinese who could enjoy family visits to Hong Kong and some Southeast Asian countries or could travel abroad as part of an official business or cultural delegation still stayed well below 1% of the total population for the following two decades.

The development since the year 2000 has seen in stark contrast to earlier times a rampant growth. It is remarkable that more than 60% of all outbound trips of the last 15 years happened only within the last quinquennium 2005–2009.

JT: This complex relation between inside and outside can also be found in China even for a global communication network like the Internet: Local players, in tune to the specific needs of the country’s “Netizens”, rule the digital space. The more than 400 million Chinese users are online for an average of 16 hours per week, the same amount of time they spend watching television. 111 million people managed a social network profile in 2009, and these numbers are growing daily. The power of the Internet in China has never been stronger and has not even begun to be realised. The Internet is quickly replacing traditional media as brands and companies seek to connect with their consumers in new and different ways. With the exception of Google, international platforms that offer a cut and paste version of their American or European sites simply fail and often get banned. Like the country itself, social media in China is fast paced, constantly changing and growing faster than anywhere else in the world. For brands looking to get on China’s digital