

A Guest at home: The experience of Chinese pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago

Abstract: This study identifies the main dimensions and attributes that shape the experience of the Camino de Santiago for Chinese travellers as a tourism product. By exploring the similarities and differences between their experience and that of Western pilgrims, it also reflects on sustainable marketing strategies of the Camino among Chinese travellers. The research adopts a phenomenological approach and gathers the data from 112 online travel journals posted by Chinese Camino pilgrims and from in-depth interviews with twelve Chinese pilgrims. The results reveal that the Camino is experienced by Chinese pilgrims as a personal journey of wellbeing and growth, as well as a cross-cultural experience. Authenticity and harmony are observed to be the key elements that contribute to a satisfying and transformative experience for Chinese pilgrims, where they find a cultural-spiritual centre close to their traditional values yet distant from their everyday social practice. Both Chinese and Western pilgrims undergo similar external and internal journey although each group travels in their respective socio-cultural framework. The study is based on Cohen's (1979) five travel-mode theory and enriches the discussion from a cross-cultural point of view. The implications for sustainable management of the Camino as a global cultural route heritage and for its effective marketing among Chinese tourists are also discussed.

Keywords: tourist experience, Chinese tourists, Camino de Santiago, heritage tourism, religious tourism

1. Introduction

The Santiago Pilgrimage Routes, a UNESCO world heritage, also known as the Camino de Santiago, have attracted millions of travellers a year since their revitalization in the late 20th century (Murray, 2014; Lois-González, 2015). The growing multi-national representation among the Camino travellers reveals the internationalization of this unique heritage tourism phenomenon as it marches into the new millennium. In 2019 alone, it received more than 340,000 pilgrims from 190 different countries and regions, including 1,062 from mainland China, who accounted for 0.3% of the total number of pilgrims (Pilgrims' Office). How contemporary travellers experience this millenary pilgrimage route has been capturing many scholars' attention for over two decades. Tourist experience can be understood as the subjective interpretation of meaning and memories in travel-related events or while consuming tourism-related services (Nash & Smith, 1991, Uriely, 2005). It leaves profound marks on tourists' memory, well-being, identity, meaning-making, destination perception, satisfaction, and the intention to revisit (Moscardo, 2010; Ali et al, 2016).

Among many scholars of tourist experience, Cohen (1979) proposed a typology that encompasses conflicting previous views on the nature of tourist experience, and conceptualized it as one phenomenon with varying degrees of motivations, needs and patterns of behaviours. According to the aforementioned author, tourist experience can be understood as the experience of traveling between cultural or spiritual 'centres'. A cultural and spiritual centre is where individuals attach their ultimate meanings and worldviews. Tourists tends to either walk away from their original centre in which life is too stressful, inauthentic, or meaningless, or away from one centre and towards another one, or merely approach a new centre as the goal of the trip without denying the cultural or spiritual centre of their origin. Depending on how a tourist moves around different cultural/spiritual centres, Cohen (1979) identified five travel modes:

recreational mode, in which tourists desire to run away from stressful modern life and look for recreation and refreshment so that they can return to their original society with renewed energy; diversionary mode, in which tourists simply want to run away from meaninglessness in their usual society by taking a vacation; experiential mode, in which individuals approach and explore their own personal spiritual centre; experimental mode, in which they are not sure of their own spiritual centre, and are trying out new lifestyles that represent new centres; existential mode, in which individuals intentionally commit to a new spiritual centre that is distant from their original one. The typology focuses on tourists' personal drives and to what extent they desire to escape from the original cultural/spiritual centre and seek an alternative. Cohen's typology of tourist experience allows us to link the desires and motivations of tourists and their behaviours: recreational and diversionary tourists want to run away and relax, they seek a break time with pleasure and fun, and are likely to behave like tourists engaging in hedonic mass-tourism activities; experiential and experimental tourists travel as cultural explorers or pilgrims, they are out for authentic experience, they seek authenticity and meaning in the life of others (MacCanell, 1973; Smith, 1992); existential tourists seek higher meaning such as human communion or union with nature, they are like new members of a culture or a religion, outside their original socio-cultural environment (Cohen, 1979).

Given that the conceptualization of tourist experience is highly subjective and shaped by socio-cultural context (Nash & Smith, 1991; Uriely, 2005), non-Western tourists' experience should be interpreted through different cultural lenses, taking a critical distance from Anglo-Western sociological theories (Nash & Smith, 1991; Winter, 2009; Cohen & Cohen, 2012, Jensen et al, 2015). Most current studies focus on pilgrims from parts of the Western world such as Europe, North America, and Oceania (Luik, 2012; Lopez, 2013; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016; Amaro et al, 2018). A close look at how the Camino is experienced by travellers from a non-Western background would contribute to a more complete picture of the phenomena of

tourist experience on the Santiago Pilgrimage Routes and of tourist experience in general. As Spain is one of the most-visited tourist destinations in the world, the entities responsible for tourism promotion in this country are striving to offer innovative and diversified tourist products to attract more high-spending tourist markets such as China, Russia, and the USA, as one of the measures to compensate for the limitations of seasonality (Lojo, 2016; Medina-Muñoz et al, 2013). Understanding Chinese pilgrims' travel experiences and preferences on the Camino can provide better information for local tourist sectors in Spain, and thus help them to improve their management and service, increase the attractiveness of the Camino and enhance their chances of success as an emerging destination among Chinese travellers.

2. Literature review

A comprehensive review of the previous literature identified two strands of topics related to the current study: the background of the Santiago pilgrimage routes and the experience of international Camino pilgrims who are mostly from a Western background.

2.1 The Santiago Pilgrimage Routes

The pilgrimage itineraries that lead to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, known as the Camino, can be dated back to the 9th century when the tomb of St James, one of Jesus' twelve apostles was first discovered and visited. The pilgrimage routes were walked for centuries until a decline in the 16th century, and were then revitalized in the late 20th century across and beyond Europe (Murray, 2014; Overall, 2019). In 1987, the Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim routes were declared the first European cultural route by the Council of Europe through its cultural route programme, which aims at celebrating the common memory, values and identity of Europe and promoting sustainable tourism (COE, 1987). Main routes and sections of the

Camino later were later included on the UNESCO World Heritage List of Sites (UNESCO, 1993, 2015).

2.2 The experience of Camino pilgrims

A considerable number of studies have researched the experiences of Camino pilgrims from a variety of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and religious studies. Pilgrim motivation is the most-investigated topic. Studies on thousands of Camino pilgrims, mostly of Western origin, showed that the popularity of the Camino starting in the late 20th century arose from secular motives rather than religious ones as the majority of pilgrims made their Camino for personal reasons that may have eventually had spiritual overtones, such as a quest for meaning and life direction, as well as a desire to escape from daily routine, relax in nature, or engage in sports or adventure (Fernandez et al, 2012; Oviedo et al, 2014; Amaro et al, 2018; Farias et al, 2019).

Much of the discussion about the extensive experiences of Camino pilgrims also focused on personal transformation and communion among pilgrims. The Camino is generally believed to be a transformative journey through which pilgrims experience a sense of freedom because the Camino allows individuals to accept the natural rhythm and limitations of the body, (Slavin, 2003; Carbone et al, 2016) and the simple and slow lifestyle on the way sets people free from the influence of consumerism and the pressures of modern life such as fast-paced schedules and endless demands (Norman, 2009; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019). Pilgrims also reported discovering a sense of updating their life priorities and world views at the end of the journey (Lopez, 2013; Luik, 2012; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016). With immersion into a de-structured setting that is in contrast with their highly structured everyday lives, pilgrims are believed to be able to enter a 'liminal space' which allows change to take place (Lopez, 2013; Turner, 1969). 'Communitas' is a concept in anthropology applied to pilgrimage phenomena

that refers to a sense of communion felt by pilgrims during their pilgrimage journey (Turner, 1969; Turner & Turner 1978). Many scholars discovered that the Camino pilgrims are able to establish an intersubjective 'communitas' among them through sharing common goals, life conditions and affective experiences (Cazaux, 2011; Luik, 2012; Lopez, 2013).

The aim of this paper is threefold: 1) to investigate the experience of Chinese travellers on the Camino de Santiago and its similarities and differences with that of Western travellers to enrich the understanding of the pilgrim experience of the Camino and inform a more sustainable and inclusive management of this global heritage route; 2) to understand the travel motivations and preferences of Chinese Camino travellers in the light of their socio-cultural contexts to increase understanding of tourist experience from a non-Western perspective; 3) to identify the main attributes of the Camino as a tourist product that attracts Chinese travellers and to reflect upon the development of the Camino route among Chinese travellers.

3. Methods

Following an interpretivist tradition, a phenomenological approach was adopted for the study to discover the experiential, meaning-making process, and the underlying dynamics of the participants through their own testimony (Patton, 1990; Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Online tourist travel blogs have been found to be effective materials to discover tourist motives, travel behaviour and destination image, as tourists can freely express their feelings and thoughts on the Internet, which makes such user-generated content a rich source of information for the purpose of this study (Carson, 2008). Since this is the first empirical attempt to investigate the experience of Chinese travellers on the Camino, online journals posted by Chinese travellers from multiple sources were searched without any time limits on their publication date, so that as much relevant data as possible could be collected. The most popular Chinese travel websites, such as Qyer, Mafengwo, and Ctrip, and the most popular Chinese

social media platforms Douban and Jianshu were searched under two key terms that correspond to 'Camino de Santiago' and 'Santiago Pilgrimage Route'. The difference is that the latter contains the word 'pilgrimage'. The first search was performed in June 2020 and the last in February 2021. The criteria for selection included 1) the authors indicated that they have completed a Camino trip; 2) the written account contains substantial content related to the author's personal experience on the Camino. Initial searches generated hundreds of results from various platforms, although not all were relevant. Journals about other pilgrimage routes, Camino-related movie reviews, historical or practical information were excluded. Repeated journals were also removed. After careful screening, 112 travel journals were located, with sixty-five from Qyer, twenty-nine from Mafengwo, two from Ctrip, nine from Douban and seven from Jianshu. The journals are systematically labelled as JR1, JR2... JR112. Most journals were written in a day-to-day, diary style and were posted after 2014, although the earliest one can be dated from 2008, and the most recent ones from 2020.

The data from online journals were treated with a traditional content analysis method and theme-identifying techniques. Inductive content analysis is a method frequently used for analysing qualitative data without a pre-existing guiding theoretical framework, which allows the researcher to look at the data with a fresh eye (Riffe et al, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Nevertheless, the major topics in previous Camino pilgrim studies were taken into consideration for the purpose of comparison between Chinese and Western pilgrims. In addition to background information about the pilgrims and how they organized their Camino, the analysis generated themes such as motivation, experience with nature, food, people, walking, accommodation, culture, etc. Those themes were further grouped into categories such as motivation, impression of Spain, culture of the Camino, evaluation of the journey, etc.

Additional data were obtained from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve Chinese travellers who have completed the Camino, in order to gain more clarity and insight into the results generated from the first phase of the research. The participants were recruited from the Chinese Camino Friends' social media community on WeChat, an active chat group with more than 300 members (by December 2020). Using purposeful sampling, the researchers selected the participants with diverse ages, genders, occupations, and religious affiliations. The participants were familiarized with the purpose of the study and were asked for their written consent to participate. The interviews were scheduled and conducted in the form of online meetings using social media during November and December 2020. As well as taking notes about demographic information and Camino travel patterns, open-ended questions were asked related to specific aspects of their experience before, during and after the Camino journey. The questions were formulated referring to the categories identified from pilgrim journal analysis, so that the data from both datasets could be merged. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and labelled as IN1, IN2... IN12.

The data generated from the interviews were analysed with the assistance of NVIVO 1.0. This treatment consisted of separate coding among the four authors, followed by inter-author verification to increase coding reliability. An intercoder comparison indicated an agreement of approximately 90% in terms of all the codes and categories. The results from the interviews were combined with those from the previous journal analysis, and relations between the themes and categories were explored at this stage.

4. Results

4.1 Pilgrim profile

The results show a group of young, urban, secular Chinese individuals walking the Camino de Santiago. As illustrated in Figure 1 and Table 1, nearly two thirds of the Chinese pilgrims in this study were young people under the age of thirty. The working population (mostly working in China) and students (mostly studying in Europe) form two main groups. More than a third of Chinese pilgrims came from the first-tier cities in China (i.e. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen). Most of them reported not adhering to any religion, and only four reported being Christian (Catholic or Protestant) across the datasets. The most popular route for Chinese pilgrims was the French Way. The majority of Chinese pilgrims travelled on foot and half of them started the journey alone. Compared to international pilgrims (Pilgrim's Office, 2019), there seemed to be more women, a younger and student population, much fewer senior and retired people among Chinese pilgrims. Both Chinese and international pilgrims chose to make their Camino mainly by walking, whereas international pilgrims tend to be more diversified in their choice of itineraries in comparison to Chinese pilgrims who are found mostly on the French Way, especially on their first Camino trip.

(Figure 1 here)

(Table 1 here)

Many Chinese pilgrims learned for the first time about the Camino from the movie *The Way* (40%), from acquaintances (28%), and websites (12%), and the rest (20%) did not disclose this information. Most Chinese pilgrims searched online for information about the itinerary, packing, accommodation, and the visa from previous pilgrims' posts on major Chinese travel websites before departure. Some also browsed the Galician official Camino website, especially those who were students based in Europe. While making this journey, those pilgrims who could read English or another Western language often used mobile applications such as *Buen Camino*

or *Eroski* for route-related information. Some also consulted guidebooks and their pilgrim peers.

4.2 Motivations

Similar patterns of travel motivation were observed across datasets. More than half of Chinese pilgrims in this study (56%) embarked on the journey mainly to promote personal wellbeing and growth, such as an escape from stress to ‘feel life’, a quest for clarifications and directions after graduation or a change of job. The second most popular motivation (52%) was curiosity, an interest in experiencing something new, such as European cultural heritage, landscape, and cross-cultural interactions through the Camino. Very few reported walking for sport/health or religious reasons. Four of the participants did not disclose their motivation. Two of them, both of whom were Christians, indicated that they also wanted to ‘get closer to God’ (JR14, IN3). A significant number of participants (37%) stated that they decided to walk the Camino after watching the movie *The Way*, since this movie had impressed and inspired them with its beautiful natural scenery, fascinating cultural heritage, and touching stories of personal growth and friendship. Some of the respondents (JR6, JR40, JR62, JR76, IN8) were motivated simply by a catchy line in the movie: ‘You don’t choose a life, you live one’. It seems that the motivational patterns of Chinese Camino pilgrims are essentially similar to those of Western pilgrims (Farias et al, 2019; Amaro et al, 2018; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016; Cazaux, 2011), for whom personal growth and new experiences are key motivators. However, unlike Western pilgrims, Chinese pilgrims rarely walk for reasons such as religious growth or sport (Oviedo et al, 2014; Farias et al, 2019; Schnell & Pali, 2013; Fernandez et al, 2012).

4.3 Experience of Spain

Experiences with local people, food, culture, and natural landscape also contributed to a vivid part of Chinese pilgrims' Camino memories. Some commented that the Camino journey made them discover a different Spain, which was previously known to the Chinese as limited to its iconic images of bullfighting, flamenco dancing, and Gaudí's architectural heritage. The most frequent word which Chinese pilgrims used to describe local people was 'warm-hearted (*reqing*)' in general, and particularly so towards pilgrims. Their passion and contentment with their lives, in addition to their relaxing lifestyle, all impressed Chinese pilgrims.

'When the locals give us a thumbs up, we feel incredible strength! Everyone greets us kindly and respects the pilgrims with backpacks and shells.' (IN6)

'Walking in Spain is a very comfortable experience. Besides the picturesque landscape, the relaxing and calm life attitude of local people shows a confident universal value that can exist only after one is self-sufficient.' (JR6)

'Maybe it's under the influence of Christian views or Western customs on life and death, their cemeteries are located inside their village, their relatives can go and visit them anytime, they don't take death as a taboo like us.' (JR64)

Data from both journals and interviews provided evidence that Chinese pilgrims were very satisfied with the authentic ('*yuanzhiyuanwei*', meaning original flavour) local food on their Camino. Some commented that Spanish cuisine is close to Chinese cuisine in terms of flavour and ways of cooking. The majority of Chinese pilgrims reported that they admired the well-preserved cultural heritage such as historical towns, churches, and cultural traditions along the Camino which contributed to a strong sense of authentic cultural experience. Some acknowledged not being acquainted with the history and culture of Spain but showed a desire

to learn more. Some stated that they had looked for an on-site introduction to better appreciate the local cultural heritage but could not find sufficient multilingual information available.

The tranquil wilderness of the Camino allowed Chinese pilgrims to enjoy not only the beauty of nature, but also a general sense of restoration, joy and connection, such as the feelings of ‘relaxation’, ‘peace’, a ‘return to simplicity and authenticity’ (*fanpuguizhen*), ‘liberation’, ‘happiness’ and ‘healing’.

4.4 The Camino as a unique culture

Some Chinese pilgrim pointed out that the Camino itself represents a culture characterised by a spiritual quest, simple lifestyles, benevolent traditions, cross-cultural interactions, and unity. This culture seemed unusual and unique in contrast with their everyday social reality.

‘In the mountains I encountered several times ‘fruit self-service’, not machines, ‘self-service’ here means not supervised. Owners put out for sale their grapes, bananas, apples, oranges, packed nuts, etc, each for 1 euro, and they left a locked cash box next to it. I’ve never seen this in cities, I think I’ll never see it. Only here on the Camino you can see something like this.’ (JR103)

‘Here there is all the earnest longing lost in the real world. Everything arrives and departs lightly but leaves a trace of warmth deep in the heart.’ (JR58)

The experience with pilgrim peers dominates the Chinese pilgrims’ Camino stories, often with detailed accounts of their observations and interactions with pilgrims of other nationalities. The altruism, warmth and openness felt from fellow pilgrims deeply touched Chinese pilgrims and fostered a sense of intimate bonding and communion. Many Chinese pilgrims used words such as ‘warm’, ‘earnest’, ‘magical’, ‘predestined relationship (*yuanfen*)’,

'family', 'belonging' to describe the unforgettable moments with other pilgrims. Dynamic exchanges of practical skills, cultural knowledge and values offered Chinese pilgrims an exciting and enriching cross-cultural experience.

'A Western grandpa brought his little grandson to experience the Camino. It seems Westerners start to cultivate independence in their children at an earlier age than Easterners.' (JR63)

'It was raining in the morning when I left...Auntie Irene from Scotland illuminated my path like an angel and reminded me from time to time about mud and puddles. I encountered all the time angels like her on the way, it has nothing to do with nationality or age.' (JR28)

'I'm very lucky that I encountered a community that's like a family: we use 'Camino family' to address each other and name our team as 'Camino legend'. We have ten young people from eight countries and five continents: we are Chinese, German, Irish, Canadian, American, French, Australian and Brazilian.' (JR54)

4.5 Evaluation of the pilgrimage route

Many Chinese pilgrim authors summarized their journey upon its completion. The interview participants were also asked to make an overall evaluation of their Camino experience. Their summaries can be classified into two types: the perceived benefits of the trip, and the attributes of the Camino. The key words and frequencies of Chinese pilgrims' evaluation of their journey are provided in Table 2. The results across datasets show that the perceived benefits of the journey are primarily personal-spiritual, e.g. personal wellbeing and growth. The Camino is seen by many as a life metaphor with its symbolic staged itineraries, uncertainties, and serendipitous events. As observed in the testimonies of many Western pilgrims (Nilsson &

Tesfahuney, 2016; Kim et al, 2016; Lopez, 2013; Luik, 2012; Balar, 2018), Chinese pilgrims seemed to have been through a transformative process from which more happiness, peace and life clarity were achieved. The Camino was also perceived as an enriching cross-cultural experience.

'Many things happened before the Camino, I was preoccupied and felt split into two: one being the body and the other the soul. On the Camino the two 'I's became one again...I recalled what I originally intended to pursue.' (IN10)

'After the Camino you easily find that the greatest happiness lies in returning to a state of simplicity and authenticity, living simply. All you need for everyday life is already in that small 8-kg backpack. The lesser the fear of life, the lighter the bag is. Reflections replace reading, distance from social media, a low level of material desires, not minding having only two sets of clothes for the whole month, and smiles are the best cosmetics.' (JR39)

'The Camino is truly a platform for cross-cultural communication... This route is a get-together for the world, open your heart and you can dialogue with the world. Isn't that exciting!' (JR22)

(Table 2 here)

The interview respondents were asked to specify the strengths and weakness of the Camino as a heritage or tourist project. The top three strengths indicated were 'completeness of facilities' (80%) and 'well-preserved cultural heritage' (77%), followed by 'beautiful and well-preserved natural landscape' (27%). A major area for improvement in the eyes of Chinese pilgrims (67%) was the lack of multilingual (Chinese in particular) information about the cultural sites along the way. When asked about their intention to revisit, all of the respondents

stated that they would like to experience the Camino again and try different routes. In fact, half of the respondents had already made their second or even third Camino by the time of the interview.

5. Discussion

The study on the experience of Chinese pilgrims reveals that the Camino is first and foremost a personal journey of wellbeing and growth, and then a cross-cultural journey of exchange and enrichment for Chinese pilgrims. It was a memorable experience for all of the Chinese pilgrims who participated in this study.

5.1 Journey of authenticity and harmony

The findings reveal two underlying elements reoccurring in the accounts of many Chinese pilgrims across the datasets. One of these was their experience of authenticity. For instance, Chinese pilgrims repeatedly described how they enjoyed the ‘original state’ of nature, historical monuments, or traditions, and the ‘original flavour’ of local food. They also emphasized how the Camino allowed them to find their ‘original intention’, to be their ‘authentic self’, or feel the ‘genuine warmth’ from others. All such expressions reflect the presence of authenticity in their experience. ‘Authenticity’ is a key concept in general tourism studies as well as in Camino pilgrim experience studies, as people are believed to seek objective and subjective authentic experience in their travels (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999; Cohen, 2007). For both Western and Chinese pilgrims, encountering an authentic world and experiencing an authentic self plays a key role in their satisfaction and the transformative benefits of the Camino (Blom et al, 2016; Carbone et al, 2016).

Traditional Chinese society emphasizes norms, self-discipline and the collective will over the individual will (Guo, 2006; Huo, 2020). Industrialized, modern Chinese life is too fast-

paced, competitive, superficial, and complicated, according to the pilgrims themselves. Both of these factors are present in mainstream Chinese society to a certain extent and tend to suppress the individual's experience of authenticity. In the non-Chinese, slowed-down and simplified time and space of the Camino, authenticity is experienced extensively through following human rhythms instead of industrial timetables; from awareness of real needs under simple life conditions other than materialized desires; from non-polluted nature, well-preserved heritage and traditions other than commercialized, artificial attractions; from articulating one's true mind other than having to wear social masks, from genuine interpersonal interactions with others rather than goal-oriented relationship maintenance. It seems that a journey like the Camino helps both Chinese people and Westerners to find a break from the stress and sensation of burnout caused by modern life.

Another almost ubiquitous element in the experience of Chinese pilgrims on their journey to Santiago was a sense of harmony. Similar experiences are also reported in the studies of Western pilgrims. Specifically, walking helps pilgrims achieve unity with the body (Cazaux, 2011); time in the wilderness fosters harmony between self and nature (Kim et al, 2016); engagement with local culture and people facilitates a sense of connectedness with the place (Carbone et al, 2016); interactions with pilgrim peers from all over the world creates a warm memory and the sense of belonging to a 'communitas' (Turner & Turner, 1978; Cazaux, 2011; Genoni, 2011; Luik, 2012).

A harmonious relationship between man and nature (*tianrenheyi*) has always been one of the core values in Chinese culture (Guo, 2006; Jiang et al, 2018). In Daoist views, a harmonious bonding with nature is like returning home, and it cultivates restoration and healing (Wang & Stringer, 2000; Qing, 2006). The representation of the Camino as a 'magical' way because of the countless serendipitous encounters with others that happened along the way, as well as the

frequent interpretation of such encounters as a pre-destined relationship (*yuanfen*) in play, can both find their roots in Chinese folk beliefs, originally introduced from Buddhism, about the cause and timing when people enter or exit a relationship with one another (Bai, 2004). This popular view in the Chinese mindset inspires individuals to perceive new relationships in a positive light and serves as a constructive force in maintaining harmonious social relationships (Zhao & Zuo, 2008). In Confucianism, social and interpersonal harmony is always at the heart of its teachings (Guo, 2006).

In short, the experience of harmony experienced on the Camino has provided a profound response to the cultural and psychological needs of Chinese pilgrims and helped them reconnect with their cultural roots (Guo, 2006; Pearce et al, 2013; Jiang et al, 2018).

5.2 Evolving modes and plural centres of travel experience

Cohen (1979) identified five modes in which a tourist travels from a relatively superficial escape mode to a more sophisticated transformation mode. He suggested that a tourist can travel in different modes on the same journey. This seems particularly true with regard to Chinese pilgrims on the Camino, who may start out as tourists who look forward to a break from stress and stagnation or as explorers who seek a new life experience, but they end up as cultural and spiritual pilgrims discovering an alternative meaningful lifestyle in which they could live simply but more happily. As the Camino journey progresses, the travel desires of the pilgrims also evolve, and their travel experience evolves correspondingly. Moreover, in Cohen's model (1979), tourists travel in between cultural/spiritual centres that symbolise varying sets of personal values and beliefs. For Chinese pilgrims, the Camino stands as a cultural centre of its own, which represents simplicity, balance, authenticity, harmony, and benevolence. The Camino functions both as a cultural centre of 'origin' and 'destination', i.e., where they come from and where they travel to. For instance, when some Chinese pilgrims

experience the presence of harmony with nature, self, and others, they feel at home because both harmony and balance are relevant in traditional Chinese culture and social life (Guo, 2006; Jiang et al, 2018). Thus, walking the Camino is walking towards a cultural/spiritual origin where their long-held values are alive. On the other hand, the Camino also reveals itself to be an alternative cultural centre, one which is simple, authentic and meaningful, in contrast to the stressful mainstream Chinese society today which has been rapidly modernized and urbanized over the last few decades. In this sense, the Camino is both a cultural/spiritual homeland (because it lives out Chinese cultural ideals and values) and a foreign land (because it stands in contrast to contemporary Chinese mainstream culture) where Chinese pilgrims paradoxically feel like *a guest at home*.

5.3 Key attractions of the Camino for Chinese pilgrims

Studies focusing on what elements of a tourist destination attract tourists have shown that climate, nature, local culture, architecture, and landforms are the primary factors, and support features such as transportation, accommodation, and events are secondary ones (Laws, 1995). The findings of the current study suggest that, for the Chinese pilgrims who participated in this study, the satisfaction they derived from the Camino not only came from its natural setting, local community, culture, and support facilities but also from its spiritual and cross-cultural features, which fostered the experience of profoundness and richness. These last two elements make the Camino stand out as unique among the other international destinations that usually attract Chinese tourists.

6. Conclusions

According to the old Chinese saying, ‘different paths end in the same destination’, or its English equivalent of ‘all roads lead to Rome’, Chinese and Western pilgrims share a lot of similar

experiences on their way to Santiago although each group travels conditioned by their respective socio-cultural frameworks.

In the light of the findings of this study regarding those aspects and elements which contributed to Chinese pilgrims' satisfaction with their Camino, a more effective marketing strategy of the Camino de Santiago among the Chinese population could be considered in the future, taking into account the following factors:

- 1) The Camino tends to be attractive to young, middle-class professionals from large cities in China and also to Chinese students living in Europe. The marketing targeted at these groups might be more effective in motivating them to experience the cultural route heritage. However, this does not rule out the possible appeal of the Camino to more general Chinese tourists, who are observed to have become more diversified and experience-seeking (UNWTO, 2019), particularly among lovers of outdoor activities, religious tourists, and perhaps among the well-off retired population (Bao et al, 2019).
- 2) Adoption of the online platforms which are most familiar to the prospective groups, such as the most popular travel websites and social media accounts used by young, middle-class professionals, or school newsletters or cultural activity programmes in European universities where Chinese students study, or utilizing the networks of university professors who teach Chinese students, particularly in Spain.
- 3) In addition to highlighting the natural landscape and cultural heritage, the authentic quality of the gastronomy, multicultural encounters, the spiritual profoundness that makes the Camino experience so unique could also be featured in the advertising efforts aimed at Chinese tourists.

4) The presentation of the Camino could be delivered through various media including online journals and articles, books, movies, video clips, promotion conferences, exhibitions, etc. and the attention could be focused on the personal stories of pilgrims through these presentations, as this is more likely to ‘wake up’ other tourists’ otherwise latent desires for personal/spiritual growth.

Furthermore, the findings of this study could provide specific implications for the sustainable management of a global cultural route project such as the Camino:

1) First and foremost, authenticity should be positioned as the most fundamental and central attribute of the heritage to keep the Camino attractive and cherished.

2) Multilingual information on the history, culture, and art of heritage sites along the Camino would also help Chinese pilgrims to intellectually appreciate their Camino more, e.g. to provide relevant digital information accessible through an on-site QR code.

3) An inclusive approach that welcomes multicultural diversity and universal fraternity would continue to inspire and foster cross-cultural dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaboration in the face of common challenges of the contemporary world such as a pandemic.

The limitations of this study lie in the possibility that younger, technologically informed subjects, along with those who felt a rich experience on the Camino are over-represented, since those who are not used to posting travel stories online or those who were not impressed by their Camino experiences might not be so easily identifiable under such an investigation. Focusing on a sample of a specific cultural group may also limit the generalizability of its findings. Another limitation is related to the retrospective nature of the interview process, which is not

conducive to capturing those spontaneous and profound thoughts and feelings on the spot, unlike in many travel journals which were written while the author was undertaking the journey.

Future research efforts should be directed to explore the experience of other non-Western pilgrims in the light of their respective cultural contexts, the experience of local people and Western pilgrims in terms of their interactions with non-Western pilgrims, and how such cross-cultural encounters transform individuals and communities and inform a sustainable and inclusive management of global cultural routes like the Camino de Santiago. A promising line of research would lay in considering how the ‘best practice’ of this European heritage route can cross-fertilize the preservation, management and tourism development of Chinese cultural itineraries. Evaluations of the effect of targeted marketing strategies among Chinese tourists could also be investigated, such as in the first and second-tier Chinese cities, or among lovers of outdoor activities in China.

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Table 1. Profile of Chinese pilgrims

		number	percentage	International pilgrims 2019
Gender	<i>Male</i>	46	37%	51%
	<i>Female</i>	78	63%	49%
age	<i>< 30</i>	78	63%	55%
	<i>30-60</i>	44	35%	27%
	<i>> 60</i>	2	2%	19%
occupation	<i>student</i>	55	45%	18%
	<i>employed</i>	51	41%	65%
	<i>retired</i>	3	2%	13%
	<i>not indicated/other occupation</i>	15	12%	4%
religion	<i>non</i>	114	92%	<i>Not available</i>
	<i>Christian</i>	4	3%	<i>Not available</i>
	<i>not indicated</i>	6	5%	<i>Not available</i>
route	<i>French Way</i>	94	76%	55%
	<i>other routes</i>	30	24%	45%
starting point	<i>Saint Jean Pied de Port</i>	36	29%	10%
	<i>Sarria</i>	31	25%	28%
mode	<i>on foot</i>	121	98%	94%
	<i>bike</i>	3	2%	6%
organization	<i>alone</i>	66	53%	<i>Not available</i>
	<i>with companions</i>	58	47%	<i>Not available</i>

Source: authors' elaboration, Pilgrims' Office

Table 2. Perception of the Camino by Chinese pilgrims

key words of benefit	numbers of pilgrims who used the key word	percentage among all pilgrims	key words of attribute	number of pilgrims who used the key word	percentage among all pilgrims
<i>growth</i>	17	14%	<i>life metaphor</i>	29	23%
<i>happiness</i>	14	11%	<i>magical</i>	28	23%
<i>feeling touched</i>	10	8%	<i>spiritual</i>	27	22%
<i>goodness</i>	9	7%	<i>personal</i>	18	15%
<i>inner peace</i>	9	7%	<i>worthwhile</i>	14	11%
<i>purity</i>	9	7%	<i>intercultural</i>	14	11%
<i>warmth</i>	9	7%	<i>unforgettable</i>	12	10%
<i>gratefulness</i>	7	6%	<i>historical-cultural</i>	7	6%
<i>liberated</i>	6	5%	<i>universal</i>	3	2%
<i>life answer</i>	6	5%			
<i>new life</i>	4	3%			
<i>rebalance</i>	3	2%			

Source: authors' elaboration

Figure 1. Profile of Chinese and International pilgrims

