

# New tourism trends in Barcelona. Chinese tourist experiences and local perceptions

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**Keywords**— Chinese tourism, Barcelona, urban tourism, emerging markets, tourists' experiences.

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# New tourism trends in Barcelona. Chinese tourist experiences and local perceptions

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**Abstract**— Chinese tourism has greatly expanded in recent decades and has recently arrived in Barcelona. Understanding these new tourists and their experiences is necessary to comprehend the emerging trends and respond to new opportunities. Tourism is an agent of economic growth for the city but requires balance in the relationship between tourists, residents, local attractions, and service companies. Chinese tourism in Barcelona is analysed from two data sources: the Chinese blogosphere, reflecting the tourist experience in Barcelona, and local press, reflecting local perceptions of Chinese tourists.

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## 1. Introduction, objectives and methodology

Tourism has been recognized as a source of wealth that results in economic benefits, foreign capital, employment, and infrastructure development; but the costs and impacts for the host community require that assessments of tourism activity also consider the perceptions of local residents (Sharpley, 2014). Almeida *et al.* (2015a) identified three main areas of tourism impacts: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental. The city of Barcelona has achieved very high success in attracting tourism, becoming the top destination city in Spain for international tourists (fig. 1). At the same time, some elements of tourism activity have provoked negative reactions among residents including protests against the excesses of tourism in the summer of 2014 (Baquero, 2014). The proliferation of illegal rental of apartments, the excessive number of tourists throughout the summer, and the constant crowds on narrow residential streets in the city centre were the main motives of such demonstrations.

Since these protests, the city has attempted to move away from the tourism of partying and alcohol consumption. *Turisme de Barcelona*, the tourism management entity, is interested

in attracting new source markets, including China and Russia. Chinese tourism stands out for the growing number and spending power of these visitors, and can be broadly categorized in four main segments: cultural (Lojo & Cànoves, 2015), shopping (Chinese Friendly, 2015), business and study. These visitors either arrive independently, and self-organized (in the case of the adventurous tourist, students and business travellers) or with traditional tour groups organized through travel agencies (ETC & UNWTO, 2012).

**Figure 1. Location of Barcelona on the Mediterranean Coast**



*Source: own elaboration*

The understanding of new outbound tourism markets and the perceptions of both hosts and guests is a key element in comprehending how new trends and new fields of research in tourism are developed. The aim of this study was to evaluate the experiences of Chinese tourists visiting Barcelona and the local perceptions of this new tourist population. Two methods were employed. The tourist experience was evaluated through a qualitative analysis of the three most influential sites in the Chinese blogosphere (ETC & UNWTO, 2012). To capture the local perception, we reviewed articles related to Chinese tourism in Barcelona from January 2010 to July 2015 in the three most widely read newspapers in Catalonia: *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, and *El Periódico de Catalunya*.

Netnography, defined by Kozinets (1998) as the written account resulting from studying the online social world, is acknowledged to generate useful insights in consumer research. This is a novel adaptation of traditional ethnography for the Internet as a virtual fieldwork site (Kozinets, 2002). In tourist studies, netnographic research was developed thanks to the “rapidly growing User Generated Content Sites through which tourists are able to reflect openly about their holidays or seek travel information provided by researchers” (Mkono & Markwell, 2014: 289). The present study selected 15 blogs on tourism in Barcelona from the three selected travel sites, which stand out for their rich content and their ability to influence key markets and future tourists: China Travel Net ([www.51yala.com](http://www.51yala.com)), Qyer ([www.qyer.com](http://www.qyer.com)) and Sina Travel ([www.travel.sina.com.cn](http://www.travel.sina.com.cn)). Blog selection was based on the numbers of readers and approvals by the user community. The authors used the keyword “Barcelona” to search all relevant blogs available for access May 1-3, 2014. Although few results were exclusively devoted to Barcelona, the city is a popular destination in tours through Europe or Spain. The information in the blogs was read carefully by a native speaker and manually coded. The qualitative coding method generated relevant quotations, which were categorized and then patterns and repeated mentions were identified.

The review of press content was based on the methodology of qualitative content analysis, defined as “empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification” (Mayring, 2000). The review of articles related to Chinese tourism in Barcelona was intended to provide an understanding of the local perception towards this tourism force. Baptiste (2007) considers that analysis of newspapers allows the capture of the social atmosphere regarding a particular phenomenon to understand how situations affect individuals. Content analysis is a non-intrusive methodology used to study a wide range of textual or visual information that has been widely developed in the field of Tourism Studies (Stepchenova *et al.*, 2009). According to Weber (1990), the methodology uses procedures to make valid inferences from texts and information sources. In the present study, a keyword search using ‘tourism’ + ‘Chinese’ + ‘Barcelona’ returned a total of 29 articles. The search was conducted on July 15, 2015. These sources were read carefully and

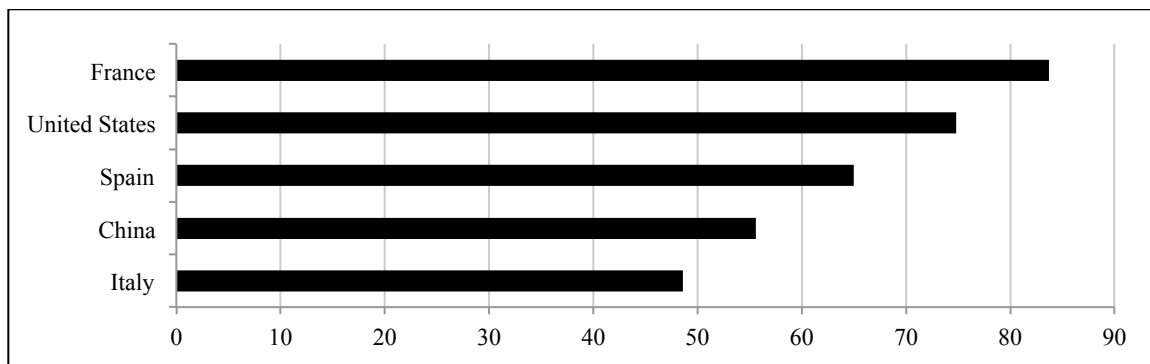
three items of information were extracted and classified: thematic area of the article, main ideas, and contextual information.

## 2. Chinese tourism in Barcelona

### *Tourism in Spain*

This section describes the main characteristics of Chinese tourism in Spain and Barcelona. It is important to take into account that Spain ranks third in receiving international tourists (fig. 2) and China is the largest outbound travel market worldwide. The tourism industry has brought enormous economic benefits and contributed to the economic development of Spain. In this country, the main benefits are 1) tourism as a source of income, 2) improvement in the trade balance, and 3) tourism as a driver of infrastructure development and job creation (Almeida *et al.*, 2015b).

**Figure 2. World countries by millions of international tourist arrivals**



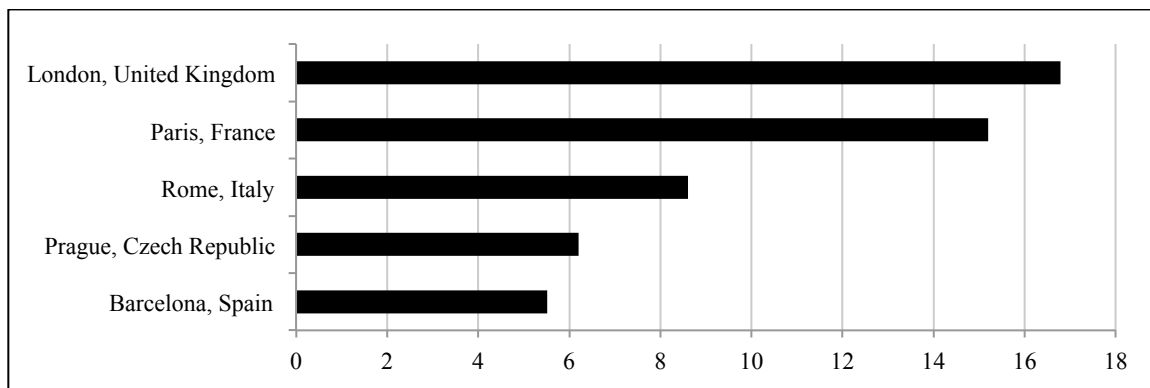
*Source: Statista (2015a).*

In Spain, tourism is mainly concentrated on the Mediterranean Coast, on the Balearic and Canary Islands, and in Madrid. Even so, more recently, the post-Fordist stage was manifested in Spain by increasing hotel supply in the Mediterranean and Atlantic coastal areas, in addition to inland mountainous areas (the Pyrenees and Cantabrian Mountains).

### *Tourism in Barcelona*

Within Spain, one of the most visited areas is the Mediterranean coast, which includes Catalonia and the Catalan capital city of Barcelona. In 2013, Barcelona had the fifth highest number of international arrivals in the European Union, with 5.52 million visitors, behind London (United Kingdom), Paris (France), Rome (Italy) and Prague (Czech Republic) (fig. 3). In 2014, this number increased more than 10%, to 6.06 million foreign visitors, in addition to 1.51 million visitors from Spain (Infotur Barcelona, 2015).

**Figure 3. European Union cities by millions of international tourist arrivals in 2013**



*Source: Statista (2015b)*

Barcelona became a tourism destination in the 1950s, within the wave of Fordism tourism (Garay & Cànoves, 2011). Nevertheless, the current stage of tourism development begins after the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona. This stage is characterized by the diversification of the supply and the city's increased carrying capacity. The tourism success of the city is related with (1) building quality spaces, (2) opening the city to the sea, (3) the role assigned to culture, (4) public investment, and (5) the projection of the international image and its role in attracting international investment (Capel, 2010).

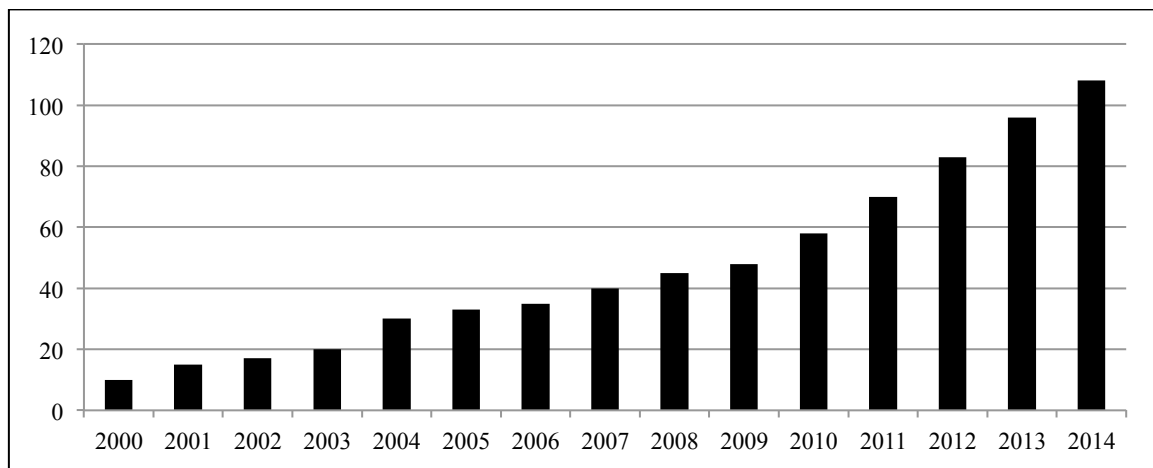
Barcelona stands out for its brand image, characterized around the Modernist architecture of Gaudí and others, Catalan gastronomy, the Mediterranean coast, specialised events and areas of shopping and consumption, such as Passeig de Gràcia. The strategy to differentiate the city is to use Gaudí as the prime example of the image of Barcelona and create urban mega-events such as the Olympic Games of 1992, The Universal Forum of Cultures in 2004, and Barcelona Mobile World Congress, held annually since 2006. Furthermore,

Passeig de Gràcia is experiencing renewed success due to tourism: the commercial sector of luxury brands has benefited greatly from the increase in the number of high-spending tourists in recent years.

#### *Chinese Outbound Tourism*

Economic growth in emerging economies such as China, Brazil, Russia and India has led to a growing middle class with a desire to travel and see the world. China has become the world's largest source of tourists; in 2014, over 100 million Chinese crossed the borders of their country (fig. 4). This represents 7.38% of a total population of 1.3 billion people. Of these 100 million tourists, only 3.5% went to Europe, while more than 90% travelled to Asian destinations. Nevertheless, in 2013, 7.5 million Chinese tourists visited destinations in the European Union (CEEC, 2015).

**Figure 4. Evolution of Chinese outbound tourism in million border crossings**



*Source: AttractChina.com (2014)*

According to previous studies, Chinese tourists travel to Europe mainly for prestige and differentiation (Yan, 2009), in search of development and modernity (Kwek & Lee, 2013), and to get in touch with cultural, heritage and monumental elements of our continent (Gonzalez, 2014). According to the World Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission, 70% of Chinese tourists travel to Europe with tour operators and the remaining 30% travel independently for business, leisure or specialized reasons (UNWTO & ETC, 2012). In Spain, the number of Chinese tourists tripled over the past five years (fig.

5). Those traveling with an organised group spent an average of 12.2 days and 2,040 euros (EuropaPress, 2014), which represents a significant effect on the national economy.

**Figure 5. Evolution of Chinese outbound tourism in Spain**

Year	Arrivals (thousands)	Increase
2010	102	—
2011	130	27.45 %
2012	177	36.15 %
2013	252	42.37 %
2014	287	13.89 %

*Source: Hosteltur (2011, 2011b, 2013, 2014, 2015).*

In Spain, Barcelona is the city most appreciated by the Chinese tourist; on average, they stay longer in this urban area (Lojo & Canoves, 2015) and it is a major gate of entry and exit (Turisme de Barcelona, 2014). When the Chinese hire a tour package with an itinerary throughout the Spanish cities, they all (100%) pass through Barcelona and spend more time in this city than in other destinations. The most valued elements of the city are the architectural heritage, the cultural elements, and the shopping. In Barcelona, the Chinese overtook the Germans and Russians to become the top credit card spenders in 2014 (El Periódico, 2014a). In the following section, we explore what interests the Chinese and which experiences they describe on travel blogs.

### **3. Bloggers' reported tourist experiences**

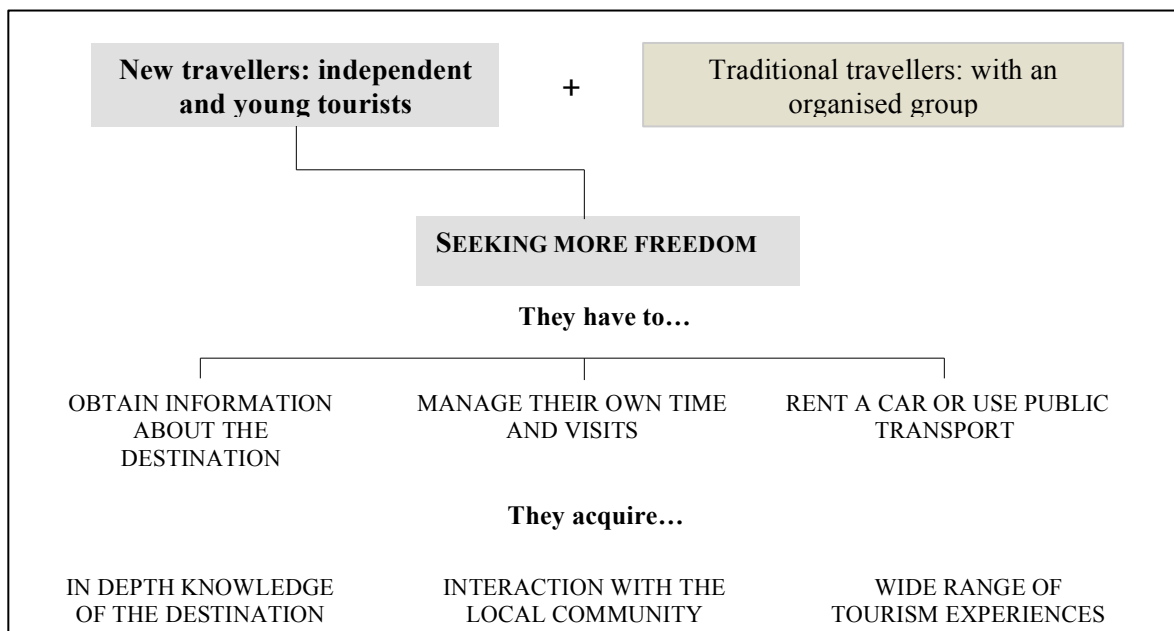
Two main ideas were extracted from the netnographic analysis of the blogosphere. On one hand, we defined the new type of tourist that travels to Barcelona and writes about the experience in a blog. This is mainly an independent traveller that does not want to travel with an organised group. On the other hand, we described the main motivations for traveling to Barcelona and the most discussed elements of the city.

The writers of the blogs tend to travel freely, without the assistance of a travel agency, and they use the Internet to obtain information about the destination and to share their experiences. Furthermore, this kind of tourist is younger and more adventurous than those



who prefer to travel with an organised group. This kind of traveller informs us about the coming trend in Chinese tourism: the travellers' desire to travel on their own, without a group. This emergent form of travel is gaining popularity among the young Chinese, but also among Japanese and Korean tourists, because they increasingly appreciate more independent travel. The selected blogs were mainly written by travellers younger than 35, an important age group now that will be even more important in the future. The challenges that this tourist has to face are the different languages of their destinations, their lack of knowledge about the destination and not having a tour guide to make arrangements at their destinations. Basically, the aim of this new tourist is to travel freely. They need access to information before and during their trip, they freely administer their own time, and they rent a car or travel by public transport. According to our analysis, this kind of tourist acquires in-depth knowledge of the destination, personal interaction with the local community, and a wide range of tourism experiences. The main motive of these new travellers is the search for freedom in their travels. According to one of the bloggers: "we thought that travelling with a group would take away our time and freedom, so we travelled independently"<sup>1</sup> (fig. 6).

**Figure 6. Experiences of independent Chinese travellers in Barcelona**



*Source: Own elaboration*

<sup>1</sup> Quote translated from Chinese by the authors.

Some of the independent travellers return visitors who had been to Europe previously with an organised group and wanted to repeat the experience independently. The analysed blogs show six main motivations for this category of traveller: (1) the attraction to European cities and culture, due to Chinese Occidentalism; (2) a desire to deepen the knowledge of the destination acquired in previous travels, (3) shopping, (4) a honeymoon, (5) business and professional meetings; or (6) pleasure.

Another category that emerged in the blogs was young Chinese who study in European universities, want to travel within Europe, and eventually arrive in Barcelona. Chinese students abroad tend to use their free time as an opportunity to visit the more popular cities. It is important to state that both categories, the traveller from China and the student abroad travelling from Europe, are already somewhat familiar with the European culture. In contrast to the experience of traditional tourists who travel with groups, the tourists who wrote the blogs appreciate interacting with the local community and tend to conform more with the local way of living.

In all the selected blogs, visits to cultural elements were one of the main motives of travel. Barcelona is described as an outstanding city due to its material heritage and architecture: “When I travel I try to learn about the history and heritage of that place (...). Barcelona is a city with an incredible architecture”<sup>2</sup>. It is noteworthy to mention that Gaudí fascinates the Chinese tourist, being the most recognizable and distinctive element of Barcelona for them. Among the bloggers there was the perception that Gaudí dominates the Barcelona tourism experience. Other elements that characterised the city were the Futbol Club Barcelona (FCB), widely known as Barça; the good weather, blue sky and nice beaches, and the feeling that the city is welcoming to tourists. The main activities that the Chinese bloggers considered noteworthy in Barcelona were visiting cultural and heritage elements, shopping, trying the local gastronomy, and exploring the city, streets and markets. It also is worth mentioning that there were a lot of warnings about the pickpockets and thieves of Barcelona. This theme was recurrent in the blogs and Barcelona was characterised as one of the least safe cities in Europe (fig. 7).

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<sup>2</sup> Quote translated from Chinese by the authors.

**Figure 7. Most-discussed elements of Barcelona**

<u>MAIN ACTIVITIES</u>	<u>CHARACTERIZATION OF THE CITY</u>
1. VISITING CULTURAL AND HERITAGE ELEMENTS	1. IMPORTANCE OF GAUDÍ
2. SHOPPING	2. ARCHITECTURE, URBAN SPACES, AREAS OF CONSUMPTION
3. GASTRONOMY	3. BARÇA (FCB)
4. EXPLORE THE CITY	4. GOOD WEATHER, BLUE SKY AND NICE BEACH
5. WATCHOUT FOR THIEVES!	5. WELCOMING CITY

*Source: Own elaboration*

#### **4. The phenomenon in local newspapers**

As Telfler & Sharpley (2008) pointed out, tourism host communities have to face the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism, which can be positive or negative. Doxey (1975) proposed the controversial Irritation Index to measure the satisfaction of the local community. Through an analysis of 29 articles in Barcelona newspapers, we aimed to understand the perceptions of city residents about the Chinese tourism presence. The articles analysed address 3 thematic areas: economy (12 articles), culture and society (8 articles), and news about Barcelona (5 articles). The higher number of articles that treated the issue economically highlights the economic impacts of Chinese tourism in Barcelona. In-depth content analysis identified 3 key elements in the residents' perceptions: (1) interest in promoting the Chinese Tourism, (2) difficulties in the cultural encounter, and (3) interest in improving the connections and the tourism services to achieve a better adaptation of the city to this tourism population.

##### Interest in promoting Chinese tourism

Chinese tourism is a type of minority tourism in Barcelona and it is at an early stage of development. According to Doxey's Index, we are in a phase of "Euphoria", associated

with the initial phase of development and the adaptation of Barcelona to Chinese tourism. Consequently, all the analysed articles mentioned Chinese tourism as something desirable that must be attracted and promoted. According to a selected quote from La Vanguardia (2010), “Catalonia wants to maintain and even expand the share of acquisition of Chinese tourism in Spain”. This statement reflects the view of a tourist that has “high purchasing power, that creates jobs, income and has a great capacity to break the seasonality of tourism” (El Periódico, 2014a). The goods most appreciated by Chinese tourists are luxury accessories, jewelry, cosmetics, and perfumes. This leaves a positive and valuable footprint in the city economy: “Chinese tourists are already key to Barcelona trade. In winter we noticed the arrival of many Russians but this spring we have noticed the sales to Chinese tourists” (El Periódico, 2014b). In the case of Chinese tourism, as with Brazilian, Russian, and Arabian visitors, the positive economic impacts are the main element that catches the attention of the press. This component is relevant to understanding the next two factors that we identified in the articles.

#### Difficulties arising from the cultural encounter

The Chinese tourist has a different cultural background, language and frame of reference or habits than the European or American tourist. This can cause difficulties in the cultural encounter behind tourists and city residents. In the newspapers, we can see the importance of having salesclerks and employees with a knowledge of Chinese language, and the concept of “Chinese Friendly” is gaining popularity within the city: “The first ‘Chinese Friendly Hotels’ appear in the city of Barcelona” (La Vanguardia, 2015). The concept refers to an hotel or a city that has at least some hints of how to adapt itself to the habits, language, and communication styles of the Chinese tourist.

Another important point is the adaptation of local services for the Chinese tourist. The media articles reflected the work of the Barcelona taxi drivers to learn how to communicate and express themselves with Chinese tourists: “A group of taxi drivers attended the first course for industry professionals on how to meet and communicate with the Chinese tourist” (La Vanguardia, 2014). The newspapers also mention that a mutual learning curve is necessary. On the one hand, we have to learn how to treat the Chinese. On the other hand, we must teach the Chinese people how to enjoy Barcelona and the gastronomic and

cultural offerings. It is also necessary to inspire tourists to repeat the visit and place the city in the minds of potential tourists. Overcoming these difficulties in the intercultural encounter should help to seduce the new tourists from China, but also from other emerging markets. As one newspaper said, “Attracting new markets is not easy, but necessary. It requires long-term strategies. Global economic forecasts say that wealth is shifted to Asia-Pacific, some Arab countries and some parts of the Americas” (El País, 2015).

#### Interest in improving connections and promotion

The third factor that appeared in the articles was the importance of improving flight connections and local services. Air China is the only airline that currently has a semi-direct connection between Barcelona and Beijing, with a brief stop in Vienna. Improving the connections between the two countries is important if Barcelona is to be at the same level as other European cities such as Paris and London, which have direct flights to and from Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. A direct connection between Chinese cities and Barcelona is seen as a key element for developing Chinese tourism in Catalonia: “The director of the Catalan Tourism Agency (ACT) will meet this week with the leaders of China Eastern Airlines and China Southern to capture direct flights to Barcelona” (La Vanguardia, 2012). Finally, all the efforts could be included in the “Shopping Tourism Plan” prepared by the Spanish Government in 2014. This plan appeared in the media and noted the importance of promoting Spain in China. If we want to promote Chinese tourism, we must be in contact with Chinese travel agencies and other parts of the travel industry in the country of origin.

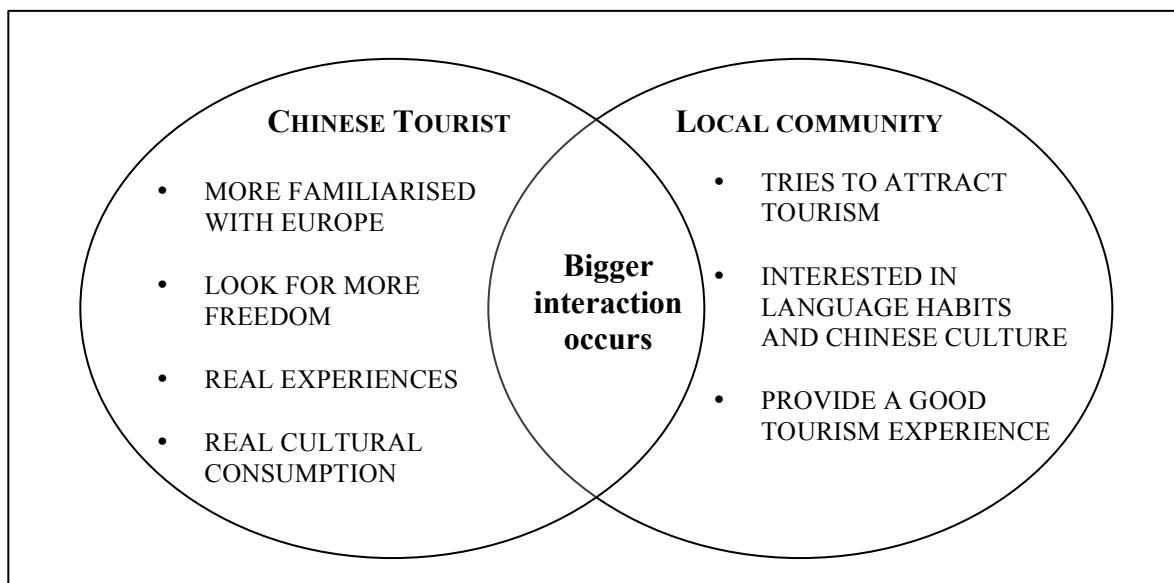
## **5. Conclusions**

Our analysis showed that the Chinese tourists who use the blogosphere to describe their travels are more prone to independent travel, younger, and more familiar with Europe than their compatriots who travel in organised groups. We identified two categories of Chinese tourists who come to Barcelona: those who travel from China and those who arrive from other European destinations because they are studying or working abroad. The attraction of

Barcelona for this tourist is mainly due to Chinese Occidentalism: European culture, European heritage, and European brands are seen as highly desirable. In the case of Barcelona, the elements identified as characterizing the city were Gaudí; the Futbol Club Barcelona (FCB), widely known as Barça; the shopping areas and luxury brands; the good weather, blue sky and nice sea spaces; and the feeling that the city is welcoming towards the tourists. There also were some negative perceptions about personal safety in the streets, with thieves and pickpockets seen as a common threat for tourists.

It is important to mention that the Chinese bloggers tended to appreciate interaction with the local community, so it is necessary that local industry and services are ready to welcome and attend this tourist population. Better understanding of this tourist population and their cultural background is essential. Their travel motivations, expectations, and interests must be known in order to provide a better tourism experience and to adapt the Barcelona tourism product to this market (fig. 8).

**Figure 8. Chinese tourism requires greater interaction**



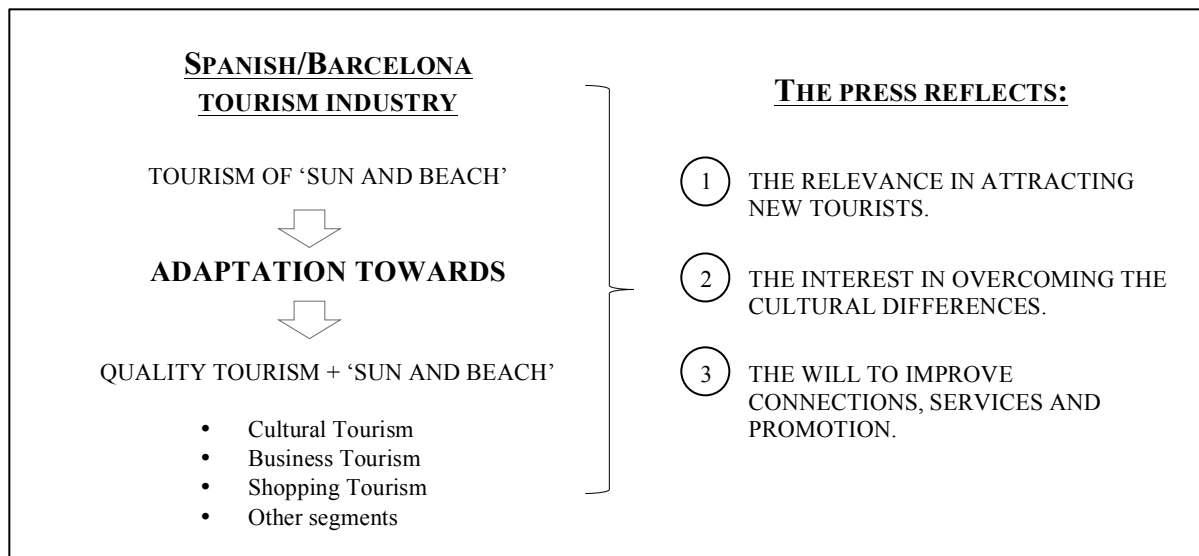
*Source: own elaboration*

Regarding the content analysis of the press, the main factors that appeared in the newspapers reflect the current stage of the tourism industry in Barcelona and in Spain overall. The press indicated (1) the importance of attracting the Chinese tourist and other new tourist populations, (2) the interest in overcoming the difficulties that arise from the

cultural differences between these tourists and the local society, (3) and the will to improve flight connections, tourism services, and the promotion of the destination.

Those three elements are connected with the current stage of our tourism industry. In recent years, the dominant kind of tourism was the ‘sun and beach’ visitor. However, the industry is now seeking to adapt itself to encouraging ‘quality tourism’. The goal is to combine the current ‘sun and beach’ emphasis with a tourism that provides more economic benefits to the destination and is less invasive. Quality tourism includes the cultural, shopping, business, student and other segments of the industry that help to break the seasonality of the sector and do not result in saturation of the urban spaces (fig. 9).

**Figure 9. The stage of the tourism industry and the main factors reflected in the press**



*Source: Own elaboration*

In the press analysed for this study, there was a notable absence of negative impacts of Chinese tourism in Barcelona,. No articles mentioned any problems with the Chinese tourist in this city, perhaps because this tourism is a minority compared to visitors from France (635,000 in 2014 data), United Kingdom (630,000), United States (627,000), and Germany (453,000). However, Chinese tourists have awakened controversy in other destinations, such as Hong Kong (Vidal, 2015) and Thailand (Paris, 2015). The Hong Kong government limited the number of Chinese tourists entering to this Special Administrative Region due to the excessive number of visitors and the local community’s rejection of this

tourism. In a London study, they were considered “pushy, loud, impolite, unruly, and they are everywhere” (Li, 2013).

This study can contribute to better understanding of the phenomenon of Chinese tourism in Barcelona, identifying the attributes of the destination that are linked to the tourist experience and to their evaluation of their visit. Urban areas currently face the challenge of managing tourism that generates minimal impacts on the local resident population in order to minimize the level of local rejection. The findings also show that economic impact is the main variable that influences local perceptions about Chinese tourism in Barcelona. The Barcelona tourism industry is in a stage of change and adaptation towards quality tourism and is interested in attracting Chinese tourism. Therefore, thorough work is needed to adapt the tourism industry, understand these tourists and their motivations and experiences, and promote the brand of ‘Barcelona’ in China.

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