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The background of the top half of the page is a scenic landscape photograph showing rolling green hills, a valley with some buildings, and distant mountain ranges under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

TOURISM CASES

June 2024

Navigating through Transnational Experiences of Chinese Working Holiday Makers in New Zealand

This case study offers insights into what motivated Chinese working holiday makers to embark on the journey, how they have adapted to local work culture, faced challenges of precarious situations, and transformed themselves throughout their working holiday experiences. It also explores the effects on New Zealand's local economy caused by this growing cohort.

Author: **Hongrui Zhu**

Affiliation: **York Business School, York St John University, York, UK**

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Summary

In 2008, New Zealand took the lead globally in offering a working holiday scheme to Chinese youth following the Free Trade Agreement between the two countries. This scheme allows Chinese participants to live, work, and/or travel for 12 months in New Zealand, which attracted huge attention and sparked enormous interest among young Chinese. Against this backdrop, the primary focus of this case study is to examine the transnational experiences of Chinese working holiday makers (WHMs) in New Zealand through a cultural lens, highlighting the distinctive characteristics of this cohort. In particular, this case study explores the factors that motivated young Chinese to become WHMs in New Zealand. Moreover, this case sheds light on their dual-layered working experience; namely how they adapted to the positive working dynamics in New Zealand compared to the working experience back in China while still navigating through perceived precarious situations. This case further discusses how Chinese individuals have transformed their understanding of sociocultural norms and parental expectations through working holidays. Furthermore, the case study examines the broader economic impact of this growing cohort on New Zealand, providing insights into the implications of the working holiday scheme.

The Value and Interest of the Case Study

This case study looks at the growing but overlooked cohort of Chinese youth in the international community of WHMs, with a focus on New Zealand. It adds a nuanced understanding to the current discussion on working holidays. Also, this study employs a cultural lens to probe into this cohort, which extends the scope beyond Western-oriented perspectives in the contemporary tourism discourse.

Background

The working holiday program in New Zealand allows young individuals from various countries that mostly have reciprocal agreements with the New Zealand government to live and travel for an extended period by engaging

in temporary employment (Wilson *et al.*, 2010; Zhu *et al.*, 2018). The working holiday visa is typically available to young individuals aged 18–30 for a period of 12 months (Immigration New Zealand, n.d.). However, the scheme in New Zealand does have a few exceptions. For instance, the age limit extends to 35 years for nationals from Argentina, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Uruguay, and the maximum stay extends to 23 months for those from the United Kingdom and Canada (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2018).

At present, New Zealand has established working holiday visa agreements with a total of 45 countries and territories, including China, the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, France, and Canada, to name but a few (Immigration New Zealand, n.d.). From 2013 to 2019, over 50,000 visas were granted under the working holiday scheme each year before they plummeted significantly in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure.NZ, n.d.-b). During its peak time before the pandemic, more than 70,000 working holiday visas were approved in the period of 2016/2017 (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2018).

One of the primary objectives of the scheme was to promote cultural exchange between participants and local communities in New Zealand as well as among participants from diverse countries (Clarke, 2005; Hugo, 2008; Wilson *et al.*, 2010). Due to the typically reciprocal nature, these working holiday schemes also allowed New Zealanders to have extended Overseas Experiences to foster their understanding of diverse societies and cultures, thereby benefiting New Zealand in the international community (Inkson and Myers, 2003; Newlands, 2006).

Beyond the cultural dimension, the scheme has significant implications for the local economy. These young participants intended to take up seasonal and/or casual jobs in industries like agriculture, tourism and hospitality, which injected temporary workforces to fill in the labor shortage in some sectors, particularly during the peak seasons (Reilly, 2015; Robertson, 2016; Zhu, 2021). This remains valid in the post-pandemic era, evidenced by a combined 79% of working holiday visa holders expressing their interest in working in the tourism and hospitality industry and 63% in agriculture-related employment (Statista, 2023a).

After signing the Free Trade Agreement with China in 2008, New Zealand expanded the working holiday scheme for Chinese citizens, allowing 1000 young individuals aged 18–30 years each year to apply for a working holiday visa (Zhu, 2018). This made New Zealand the first and only country in the world that initiated this kind of scheme for young Chinese from 2008 to 2014 until Australia implemented a similar work and holiday scheme in 2015 (Zhu, 2018). Due to the unique nature of the scheme and the limited opportunities (approximately 1000 visas) each year, it was noted that the annual quota of New Zealand working holiday visas was filled within 24 h of their release (Yang, 2014).

Method

Interviews were employed to gain an insightful understanding of the transnational experiences of Chinese WHMs in New Zealand. These interviews were conducted from March to June 2016 in Queenstown and Christchurch, New Zealand (Zhu, 2018). These two locations were chosen for recruiting participants as Queenstown is a popular all-year resort town and Christchurch is the gateway city of the South Island (Zhu *et al.*, 2020). Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants in both locations (Noy, 2008) as Chinese WHMs tended to have their own social networks.

Participants were aged between 21 and 33 as some of the WHMs had completed their working holidays at the time of interviewing and changed their visas to stay in New Zealand (Zhu, 2018). They originally came from provinces all over China. Among the interviewed Chinese WHMs, five of them had obtained diplomas from junior college (a level of education beyond high school but below a bachelor's degree in the education system of China), 21 had a bachelor's degree and 7 had a master's degree. Only one participant had a high school diploma as he put a pause on his university life to undertake working holidays. Many of them have accumulated work experiences in China to differing extents, allowing them to make comparisons of working in both countries.

These interviews were undertaken in Mandarin and recorded digitally. All interviews were transcribed into Chinese characters and later translated into English for further analysis (Zhu *et al.*, 2019). Thematic analysis has been employed for data analysis to identify key themes to add a more nuanced understanding of Chinese WHMs (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Walters, 2016). The interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and prevent them from being identified.

Motivations for Becoming Working Holiday Makers

Chinese WHMs articulated their reasons for embarking on a working holiday journey in New Zealand. Parental expectations of long-term commitments that they were not ready to make (Zhu, 2018) and a predetermined

life trajectory imposed by the cultural values in China (Zhu, 2022) have led to their desire to escape by using the working holiday scheme as a way to explore alternative life paths and challenge traditional expectations. According to Statista (2023b), over 33% of the registered marriages in China were among people who were aged between 25 and 29 in 2022. In comparison, approximately 40% of the newly married people were between 20 and 24 years old in 2012. Although young Chinese have chosen to get married at a later age in recent years due to increasing employment pressures (Global Times, 2023), they are still expected to do so at certain ages by society and their parents. Several Chinese WHMs found themselves in this conundrum:

It felt like I reached a point where marriage seemed necessary, but I could not figure out the reason behind it. Although I was in a loving and committed relationship, I did not feel the rush and need to get married back then. (Athena)

My parents were concerned about me. They considered being single at my age as an unstable lifestyle. I did not perceive myself as being that old since I was only around 25. However, given the societal norms in China and family and friends around them getting married, their anxiety intensified. (Jenny)

Other participants also found themselves at a crossroads in their lives where social norms and parental expectations urged them to get married, yet they could not persuade themselves to fulfill such anticipation. Therefore, they opted for working holidays as a break from societal and parental expectations to discover alternative ways of living. This constituted a distinctive factor that motivated young Chinese to participate in working holidays, which was different from the desire to escape from certain responsibilities by undertaking extended travel expressed by their Western counterparts (O'Reilly, 2006).

Moreover, these young Chinese strategically chose some transient periods in their lives, such as in-between jobs and completion of university, to undertake working holidays (Zhu *et al.*, 2020). During these periods, they would face relatively less pressure from their parents and have more bargaining power when negotiating with their parents for the decision to undertake working holidays as they have fulfilled parental expectations (Zhu, 2018).

Adaptation to Local Work Culture

By becoming WHMs, Chinese youth have experienced the positive working dynamics in New Zealand workplaces and undergone remarkable adaptations to the local work culture, showcasing drastic changes in their professional experiences as compared to what they experienced in China. According to Stats NZ (2022), approximately 65.2% of employed people were satisfied or very satisfied with their balance between work and life in 2021. Young Chinese were able to maintain a balance between work and life as WHMs in New Zealand (Zhu, 2021), which contrasted with their Korean counterparts who faced challenges in achieving work-life balance due to intensive working schedules (Yoon, 2014). However, young Chinese often experienced blurred lines in Chinese workplaces, for instance:

In China, working was a more serious thing, but it was not like that I did not take my jobs here seriously. There was a distinct boundary between professional and personal life here. When I was working in China, sometimes I had to remain on-call even during non-working hours, as my boss would call me to revise some materials for the next day or work overtime. But here, when you are off work, you can switch off your phone. (Diana)

Additionally, Kennedy (2007) pointed out that leaders in the work environment of New Zealand tend to advocate egalitarian values, adopt down-to-earth attitudes and approaches toward problem-solving, and encourage teamwork and enthusiasm among team members. From their working experiences, Chinese WHMs expressed appreciation for the hands-on approach employed by New Zealand managers and the blurry line between management and employees, which was different from Peng and Hebbani's (2014) finding that Taiwanese WHMs were being mistreated and discriminated against by their managers in Australian workplaces.

Some Chinese WHMs, most of whom held either diplomas or degrees in higher education and were expected to undertake office work if they had stayed in China, engaged in manual labor jobs during their working holidays in New Zealand, which overturned their fundamental values toward the social norms and cultural perceptions of job hierarchy that are prevalent in the Chinese society (Zhu, 2021). These experiences reflected a departure from the hierarchical leadership and status that they experienced in China (Zhu, 2021):

When I communicated with my manager here, I tended not to refer to their titles. We were all colleagues who would help each other out. It was something you could not find in China. There was a much stricter hierarchy in China and everyone held in awe towards the leadership. (Ivy)

Precarious Situations

Although these young Chinese have gone through positive adaptation to the work culture in New Zealand, they have also faced a myriad of precarious situations, reflecting the inherent challenges in their temporary status and employment experiences. Due to language barriers, cultural differences and foreign environments, Chinese WHMs tended to build their main social networks in New Zealand with people who spoke the same language and cultural background, which is known as a co-ethnic community (Zhu *et al.*, 2022). The cultural and language familiarity within these co-ethnic communities created a false sense of trust (Robertson, 2016). This contributed to making Chinese WHMs prone to exploitative practices, such as underpaid employment and unfavorable working conditions, which set them apart from their Western counterparts (Zhu, 2018; Zhu *et al.*, 2022):

After I got here, the most common thing I heard was 'You are more likely to be ripped off by your fellow compatriots'. Later, I did encounter something similar. When I was looking for jobs in a Chinese restaurant, I was offered \$9 NZD per hour with three weeks of training without compensation, which was against the law. (Belle)

Due to their temporary status, Chinese youth found themselves often undertaking arduous physical work in sectors like agriculture, tourism, and hospitality (Zhu, 2018), which is a common phenomenon among both Western and Asian WHMs (Rice, 2010; Yoon, 2014). Undertaking labor-intensive employment led to young Chinese having doubts about their choices of going on working holidays in New Zealand (Zhu, 2018; Zhu *et al.*, 2022):

When employed at a mussel factory, I experienced daily discomfort in my hands, waist, and shoulders. To lighten the mood at work, we joked about being on "labordays" not working holidays as it was quite repetitive and physically demanding. The nature of the jobs allowed me to have ample time to reflect on my decision to embark on working holidays. (Peggie)

The inherent financial insecurities forced young Chinese to endure exploitative practices, including undesirable living conditions and unpaid working hours, to make ends meet (Zhu *et al.*, 2022). The high costs of living in popular tourist destinations like Queenstown exacerbated their inherent vulnerability (Zhu, 2018). Charles referred to his accommodation in Queenstown as "the ghetto," and David's bunk bed was once urinated on by one of his roommates (Zhu, 2021).

Transformative Moments

Having experienced positive working dynamics and faced precarious situations in New Zealand, Chinese WHMs had undergone personal transformations as they navigated through transnational experiences in a foreign cultural context. In China, young professional women who have not got married at the expected ages (normally in their 20s, as discussed above) will be labeled as "leftover ladies," which carries negative societal and cultural implications of being undesirable in the marriage and dating market (To, 2013; You *et al.*, 2021). Considering the age range of the interviewees, more than half of them would have been labeled in this way if they had stayed in China (Zhu *et al.*, 2021). However, these young women have undergone a significant cultural shift in terms of their attitudes toward marriage, allowing them to challenge the traditional life trajectory expected by parents and the labels imposed by society (Zhu *et al.*, 2021; Zhu, 2022), which represents a unique dimension of transformation encountered by Chinese WHMs:

In China, everyone seems to be obligated to do things appropriate for one's age. If I were still in China, people would wonder why I have not had a boyfriend and/or got married and I would be considered as a 'leftover lady' because of my age and relationship status. However, after I got here, I noticed that many locals often got married at a later stage. I realized that nobody could force me to get married, instead, I would take control of my life. (Caroline)

Meanwhile, these young Chinese, born among the only-child generation, have explored their sense of self through the working holidays, which resembles their Western counterparts (Pearce and Foster, 2007). For example, they have become more independent and courageous through embarking on this journey alone in a foreign country (Zhu *et al.*, 2021):

I have been living with my parents from kindergarten to college, so I have never been on my own. After I got here, although sometimes I could not find a place to live but a tent, I would not tell these things to my parents. I felt I had become more independent since I could solve the problems and overcome the difficulties on the road by myself. (David)

Impact on the Local Economy

Beyond the transnational experiences of Chinese WHMs on a personal level, this case study extends to the broader implications for the local economy of New Zealand. Previous research has examined how temporary migrants under the working holiday scheme contribute to the economy of Australia (Tan and Lester, 2012). In the context of New Zealand, a substantial growth in the number of Chinese visitors was witnessed before the COVID-19 pandemic, rising from 228,000 in 2013 to 448,000 in 2018 (Figure.NZ, n.d.-a). Popular destinations like Queenstown were packed with Chinese tourists during Chinese New Year (Kuprienko, 2016). This significant influx of Chinese tourists led to an increasing demand for workforces who can speak Mandarin to cater to the needs of this market and enhance the overall tourist experience (Zhu, 2021). By becoming WHMs, these young Chinese contributed to the tourism and hospitality sector by filling the labor gap, particularly during the peak season in popular tourist destinations like Queenstown. The dynamic relationship between the need for employees who are fluent in Mandarin and the supply of young Chinese under the working holiday scheme has exerted a significant impact on the local economy. As New Zealand gradually welcomes back Chinese tourists in the post-pandemic era, the roles of Chinese WHMs in the labor market and local economy of New Zealand will regain significance.

Amid these positive contributions made by WHMs, there are challenges and concerns that need prompt attention and action within the context of the working holiday schemes. For example, relatively low wages, coupled with long and unsociable hours, are prevalent in sectors like agriculture, tourism, and hospitality. This will intensify the financial insecurities of WHMs dealing with rising living costs after the pandemic. Additionally, the scarce options for accommodation in popular destinations like Queenstown will heighten their susceptibility to exploitative practices, such as sub-standard living conditions at high costs (Edens, 2015). The juxtaposition of positive impacts on the local economy derived from the community of WHMs and the challenges faced by them due to their temporary nature has posed a complex dilemma for policy makers and stakeholders. Consequently, as New Zealand navigates its economy through the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to maintain a balance between the tangible benefits of integrating migration forces and the potential challenges arising from the implementation of the working holiday schemes.

Conclusions

In sum, this case study serves as an exploration of the transnational experiences of Chinese WHMs in New Zealand. By exploring the motivations of becoming WHMs, their adaptation to the local work culture as well as the precarious situations and transformative moments they have experienced, this case study adds a nuanced perspective to the ongoing discussion on this significantly growing cohort and enriches the current discourse of the international working holiday community. By probing into the cohort through a cultural lens, this study also broadens its focus beyond the prevalent Western viewpoints in the current tourism discourse. Furthermore, this case study provides insights into how Chinese WHMs impact the local labor market and economy in a broader sense.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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