

Analysis of the Sustainability of Cultural Tourism Destinations in China from the Tourist Perspective: Case Study of the Ancient Town of Wuzhen

by
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VANCOUVER ISLAND
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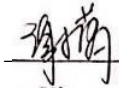
By

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Presented as part of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Sustainable
Leisure Management within the Department of Recreation and Tourism Management
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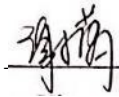
DECLARATION

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THESIS EXAMINATION COMMITTEE SIGNATURE PAGE

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Department of Recreation & Tourism Management for acceptance, the thesis titled “ Analysis of Sustainability of Cultural Tourism Destinations in China from Tourist Perspective: Case Study of Wuzhen Ancient Towns” submitted by Xiao Xie in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sustainable Leisure Management.



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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores sustainability issues in the context of one cultural tourism destination in China by analyzing the experiences shared by tourists on TripAdvisor who visited Wuzhen, an ancient water town in China. Many sustainable development challenges still face Chinese tourism destinations. Previous studies on issues in Chinese tourism explore and analyze the issues from the perspectives of residents, tourism organizations, and governments; the perspectives of visitors/tourists are seldom considered. This gap in the academic literature, combined with the rapid growth and development of the tourism industry in China, lends significance to the study of sustainability issues related to cultural tourism destinations in China. Wuzhen was chosen as the site of this research because it is a prime example of an ancient Chinese town, which are popular tourist destinations. The analysis of visitors' reviews left on TripAdvisor indicates that Wuzhen's sustainable tourism development is effective. Visitors shared positive reviews of their experiences in Wuzhen, and the benefits to various stakeholders are well balanced. The findings of this study suggest that other ancient cultural destinations can learn much from Wuzhen's example.

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CHAPTER 1

1. Introduction

In the past ten years, the number of tourists travelling abroad has grown rapidly (World Bank, 2016). In 2016, 1.186 billion tourists traveled internationally (World Tourism Organization [WTO], 2016), a 5% increase from 2015 (WTO, 2016). Issues such as over-commercialization, the destruction of historical and cultural heritage, decreased authenticity, and the potentially negative impact on local communities have been widely covered in Western media (Chen, Huang & Cai, 2014). The top five most popular tourist destinations across the globe in 2015 were France, the US, Spain, China, and Italy (WTO, 2016). The increase in China's tourism development was second only to that of the United States (WTO, 2016) over the past decade (as measured by international tourism receipts).

In the 21st century, as household incomes increase and tourists' expectations of quality of service grow, international tourists are no longer satisfied with simply sightseeing (Alegre & Garau, 2010). Rather, tourists are seeking to enhance their experience and memories through the experiential tourism industry (Yan & Hu, 2015). This is particularly relevant in China, as Chinese people currently have more disposable income to spend on leisure products and services than they did ten years ago (Statista, 2014). The large number of domestic tourists in China is also partially explained by its vast population (Statista, 2014). There has also been an increase in the attention that people pay to the development of the tourism industry and to experiential tourism product and service design in China (Wu & Zhang, 2003). Stakeholders are also increasing their focus on sustainable development within the tourism industry, due to the significant impact that travel and tourism organizations have on societies and on the environment. Sustainable development is a strategy that satisfies the needs of the present without compromising the capacity of future generation, maintaining a balance between economic growth, care for the ecological environment and socio well-being (Wang,

2006). There are positive and negative impacts. One positive impact, for instance, is that the tourism industry can economically benefit tourism organizations and employees in the industry. Tourists' behavior can also affect the environment, as can the government's protection activities (Hammond, 2013). As an example of a negative impact, a high volume of visitors in one destination might result an unbalanced ecosystem of the destination. The visitors' behavior might interrupt the peaceful life of local residents. If tourists litter, the local streets would be negatively impacted and refuse workers would have much more work to do. These are examples of how the tourism industry's development can affect many aspects, both positively and negatively. The number of tourists in China has grown annually, and discussions regarding the sustainability of the tourism industry in China have increased (Hammond, 2013).

Chinese tourism destinations are facing numerous challenges related to sustainable development (Chen et al., 2014). Song and Zhang (2014) found that many Chinese tourism companies met international sustainability evaluation standards, thus demonstrating that Chinese tourism-related companies can meet international standards for sustainability. However, Liu, Xie, and Zhao (2014) argue that the sustainable development practices within tourism and hospitality companies in China were uneven. Liu et al. (2014) state that many destinations in China faced the issue of high demand and lower supply, resulting in lower satisfaction levels among tourists. Because tourists' reflections on their experiences can directly indicate if they were satisfied or not, this study focused on these experiences.

1.1 Importance of the Study

In 2005, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) established the Indicators for Sustainable Tourism Workshop in China (Bao, 2012). It suggested that relevant organizations should adopt sustainable practices. Bao's 2012 study of Yangshuo, a popular sightseeing and cultural tourism destination in China, highlighted

many issues such as: damage to animal life and the environment; an overabundance of tourists and negative attitudes of local residents towards them; general over-commercialization (See Figure 1); and the declining perception of local residents that tourism improves their quality of life (See Figure 2; Bao, 2012).



Figure 1. Over-commercialization of one local street in Yangshuo (Bao, 2012)

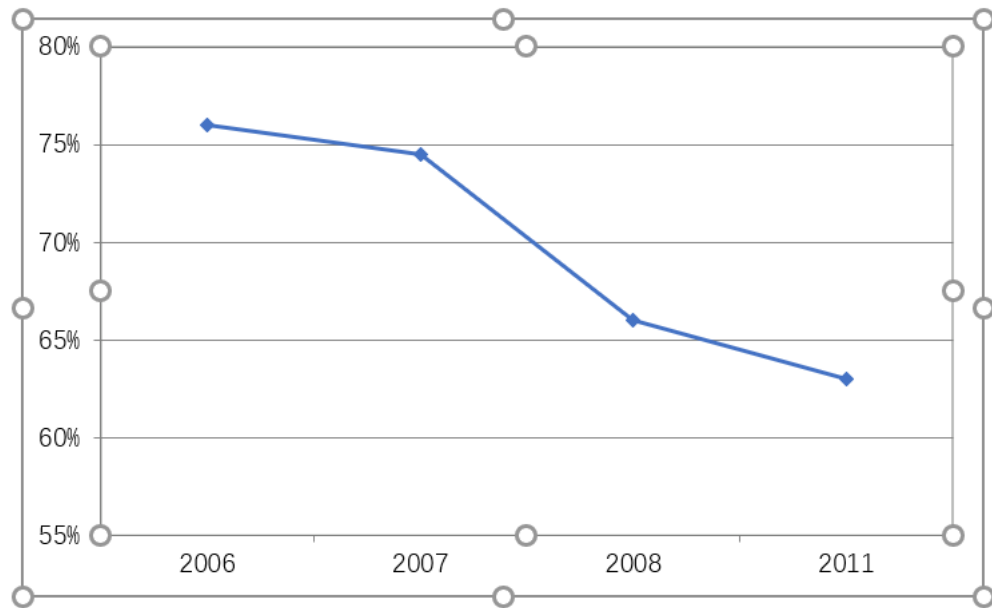


Figure 2. Percentages of local residents who think tourism has improved their quality of life (Bao, 2012)

A review of current research indicates that many studies have focused on hotel companies (Liu et al., 2014; Song & Zhang, 2014; Targeted News Service, 2016) and some have examined restaurants (Fabinyi & Liu, 2014). There were comparatively few

studies of tourism destinations, particularly cultural tourism destinations. As a result, more studies on the sustainable development of cultural tourist destinations in China are needed. Cultural attractions are valuable resources within China, so it is important to study the sustainable development of cultural tourism for a number of reasons. The WTO noted that cultural tourism accounts for 37% of global tourism and that the cultural tourism sector's growth rate was up by 15% (Solimar International, 2015). It also recommended that more studies of cultural tourism destinations' sustainable development issues in China be conducted. Bao (2012) suggests that the UNWTO Indicators for Sustainable Tourism Workshop study should be adopted by more tourism destinations, and urges researchers to explore sustainable development situations in China.

Given the rapid development of China's tourism industry, examining the sustainability issue related to cultural tourism destinations in China was particularly important. The perspectives of residents, tourism organizations, and governments were explored and analyzed in previous studies on Chinese tourism issues (Bao, 2012; Fabinyi & Liu, 2014; Liu et al., 2014; Song & Zhang, 2014; Targeted News Service, 2016) but visitor/tourist perspectives were seldom sought or analyzed. Ballantyne, Packer, and Sutherland (2011) suggest that analyzing visitors' experiences and levels of satisfaction can help organizations and government departments identify existing and potential issues.

Sustainability-related issues are best explored by collecting and analyzing data about visitors' experiences and levels of satisfaction after they have visited cultural tourism destinations. The findings of such research would be useful to both tourism organizations and local government departments. The purpose of this research was thus to analyze sustainability from the perspective of visitors.

1.2 Study Area

The research described in this thesis focused on the Jiangnan region, which is located south of the Yangtze River in China. The Jiangnan region is known for its water town tours, and there are many lake and pool views similar to those found in large cities like Shanghai. The rich culture and long history of the Jiangnan region's ancient towns have contributed to their becoming some of the most popular tourist destinations in China (Zhou, 2006). The water towns in the Jiangnan region have a rich cultural history, which stemmed from the development and prosperity of the Ming and Qing dynasties (Yan & Hu, 2015). Many houses in this region maintain the style and layout of the late Qing Dynasty, and many folk arts and customs have been preserved (Yan & Hu, 2015).

Since the late 1990s, tourism within ancient towns has been developing rapidly (Wang, 2006). In 2001, six towns (Zhouzhuang, Tongli, Luzhi, Wuzhen, Nanxun and Xitang) in the Jiangnan region were included in the World Cultural Heritage Tentative List, and the brand of ancient towns and water villages was becoming increasingly well known. Motivated by the tourism boom in ancient towns, local governments in China started to develop tourism in these ancient towns on a large scale (Wang, 2006). However, excessive tourism and commercialization have negatively affected the sustainability of the tourism industry in ancient towns.

For this research, the ancient town of Wuzhen was selected from the six famous towns in the Jiangnan region (see Figure 3). Wuzhen is a typical ancient water town in China that attracts millions of tourists annually. In 2014, the number of visitors reached 6.92 million, the year-on-year growth rate of 21.76%; and the country's ticket revenues reached 478 million yuan, the year-on-year growth rate of 28.03% (Tongxiang Government Information Catalogue, 2014).



Figure 3. Map of case study location in Wuzhen in China

Wuzhen was chosen not only because it was representative of the ancient towns in China, but also because it has undergone substantial construction and development in the 21st century. Reviewing its tourism products and services helped determine whether that development has incorporated sustainability strategies. Zhu, Dai, and Bao (2004) state that economic benefit was the key factor driving the commercialization of this specific ancient town, but that the preservation of natural and cultural resources should also be considered in the development process (Bao, 2004). A thorough analysis should demonstrate whether this specific ancient town has been over-commercialized.

Many visitors also identified the authenticity of ancient towns as important aspects of their visit (Wang, Shi & Chen, 2007). Wuzhen was included in the World Cultural Heritage Tentative List and was thus given an authenticity rating by that organization. However, tourists still questioned the authenticity of the town, which had been influenced by the local tourism organizations' planning and development (Dogl & Behnam, 2015). While studying and analyzing the experiences of this town's tourists, the issue of authenticity was also addressed.

Financial support from government agencies and other organizations was required to develop ancient towns in a sustainable manner. Between 1995 and 2003, money from

government funding, income from tourism, private donations, and foreign capital investments totaled 10 billion yuan (about 1.9 billion CAD). This amount was invested in protecting ancient towns in Zhouzhuang, as well as in comprehensive remediation and reparations (Jiang & Su, 2013). The government repaired houses and ancient buildings that were larger than 50,000 square meters, demolished 2,500 square meters of illegal construction in ancient towns, and maintained a total of 12,400 square meters of roads in order to properly maintain the "bridge, river, households" style that characterizes water towns (Jiang & Su, 2013). It also restored valuable historical and cultural landscapes (Jiang & Su, 2013). Visitors, local communities, and tourism organizations were all satisfied that the cultural heritage and the environment were protected over the course of this development. These details are noted here to demonstrate that sustainable development management in ancient towns in China required many resources and much support.

1.3 Research Objectives

The aim of this research project was to explore visitors' perceptions of various aspects of the ancient town of Wuzhen and evaluate sustainability issues in China's cultural tourism destinations. Its three objectives were to:

- investigate visitors' levels of satisfaction with their experiences in the ancient town of Wuzhen;
- analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental aspects of this cultural tourism destination based on those experiences; and
- evaluate Wuzhen's prospects for sustainable development.

This research was based on the triple bottom-line framework of sustainability (Travis, 2011), which balanced the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental benefits of tourism destinations (Figure 4). This framework was chosen above other models of sustainability because it has been so widely applied in analyzing empirical data in the

field of tourism development (Pomucz & Csete, 2015; Vellecco & Mancino, 2010; Wan & Li, 2013).



Figure 4. Sustainability framework used in this study

1.4 Suitability to Sustainable Leisure Management

Sustainable leisure management balances economic, social, and environmental benefits within the consumption of leisure products and the process by which they are marketed (Travis, 2011). Cultural tourism has become an important form of a leisure product in China. A growing number of tourists value a cultural experience that differs from life in their hometown and country, a factor that contributed to a marked increase in international tourist arrivals over the past ten years (World Bank, 2016). This study explored the sustainable development of cultural tourism destinations, which was a crucial aspect of sustainable leisure management. The three measurements utilized were also key components of sustainable leisure management. This study thus fits well with current literature within the field of sustainable leisure management.

1.5 Overview of Thesis Components

This thesis consists of five parts, the first of which is presented above in the description of the study's research context and objective. The literature review then outlines the study's theoretical foundation by delineating existing theories about the concepts of experiential tourism, cultural tourism, visitor experience and satisfaction, and the sustainable development of tourism destinations. The third chapter details the methods employed. Findings from the data analysis are explained in the fourth chapter. Finally, those findings are linked to the triple bottom-line theoretical framework and practical applications are summarized. Some future research directions are also suggested.

CHAPTER 2

2. Literature Review

Four key concepts are introduced in this chapter: experiential tourism, visitor/tourist experience, sustainable development of tourism destinations, and customer knowledge. In the discussion of experiential tourism, the topic was narrowed to cultural tourism, while the analysis of visitor/tourist experience was widened to include the concept of satisfaction. The section on sustainable development addressed three dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental. Links between cultural tourism, visitor experience and satisfaction, and sustainable development of tourist destinations were also outlined, and empirical studies, specifically related to the cultural tourism destinations of ancient towns in China, was discussed. The last concept, customer knowledge, was presented to demonstrate that a collection of experiences from customers helps organizations to achieve the goal of sustainably developing tourist destinations.

2.1 Experiential Tourism

This section defines experiential tourism and cultural tourism and maps the embedded features of these terms within the context of ancient towns. In this study, the analysis and discussion of Wuzhen is based on theories of experiential tourism. Customer satisfaction and perception are both related to tourists' experiences in ancient towns.

2.1.1 Definition of Experiential Tourism

Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003) define experiential tourism as a mode of travel, which was previously designed and organized. Visitors needed to invest time and effort to participate in this type of tourism. Experiential tourism adds significant value to

tourists' experiences as it offers participants emotional, psychological, and physical benefits. From a psychological standpoint, individuals hope to achieve goals, and they seek recognition from others when they succeed. As a result, they can achieve a sense of pride, pleasure, and satisfaction. Within the context of tourism, experiential activities can provide individuals with opportunities to explore, demonstrate, and understand themselves. Therefore, people see visiting these destinations as a type of success, and experience pleasure and satisfaction for meeting a tourist goal (Li & Li, 2006). Curtin (2005) explains that when people participate in experiential activities, they might re-think their previous assumptions about the relationship between human beings and nature. For instance, people can walk in wildlife areas and observe how animals live. This experience can make them contemplate the importance of biodiversity, and attend to the relationship between human beings and nature. Smith (2005) defines experiential tourism in a more specific way claiming that experiential tourism is related to an experience economy: developers now provide experiences as products within tourism rather than simply providing services. As a personalized and differentiated form of tourism, experiential tourism encourages visitors to participate in tourism activities and enables them to participate in local culture (Smith, 2005). Having a memorable experience is a goal pursued by both tourists and developers. Within this framework, tourists pay for their experiences, while developers offer special experience products to visitors to get them involved in the local community and culture (Smith, 2005).

Yan and Hu (2015) note that many tourism developers have tried to design more experiential products for tourists to enhance the number and quality of memorable experiences within a single trip or vacation. Wu and Zhang (2003) stated that experiential tourism encompassed entertainment, education, and esthetic appreciation and that tourist thereby experienced both physical and mental stimulation in addition to gaining unforgettable memories.

Based on these definitions of experiential tourism, it is clear that this concept

differs from the traditional tourism model, which focuses on all the tourism products sold by individual operators and companies, such as food, souvenirs, and accommodation (Li, 2007). By generating strong emotional and psychological links between visitors and their destinations, experiential tourism has become increasingly popular (Yan & Hu, 2015). Tourists choose to travel to other cities and countries because they want to have a unique, unforgettable tourist experience. Such experiences are the most important aspect of their vacation (Li & Sun, 2009). As the object of tourism resources, experiential tourism is a relatively simple product, which has enormous social significance. This type of tourism uses fewer resources and has a smaller environmental impact than traditional models (Tang & Wang, 2009). For instance, a meal flavored with local spices is relatively inexpensive and sustainably produced, but can arouse a powerful emotional response in tourists.

Yan and Hu (2015) suggest that tourism organizations should design their products and services comprehensively, so that visitors can conveniently reach destinations, enjoy their time there, and form long lasting memories of their travels. Beyond memories, a better outcome is that visitors develop a more comprehensive perception of their destinations on both a physical and spiritual level (Yan & Hu, 2015).

Experiential tourism products emphasize the bigger-picture experience on a whole and the tourists' participation in it (Li, 2007). Many tourist organizations in famous destinations implement themed events every year to attract international tourists, such as country music festivals and country-style cuisine festivals. The farming element, for example, provides tourists with an emotional experience. A cultural event is an example of an event that a tourist might experience; therefore, one form of experiential tourism is cultural experiential tourism (Li, 2007).

2.1.2 Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is similar to general experiential tourism (Raj, Griffin, Morpeth & C.A.B.I, 2013). Its focus is to give tourists a special experience by emphasizing culture-related phenomena (Raj et al., 2013). Culture refers to the accumulation of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, religion, material objects, property and so on that were generated by previous generations of a group of people (Csapo, 2012). In the context of tourism, culture is defined as the totality of physical and intellectual products that human beings created throughout history. It can be expressed in language, literature, art, buildings, food, and clothing, among other forms (Tomaselli, 2012) and is closely related to the people's livelihoods (Fan & Jia, 2007).

Intangible cultural heritage refers to various forms of traditional culture that are inherited by people of all nationalities and are closely related to the community residents' life. Oral folk literature, folk-custom performances, etiquette, festivals, and traditional artisanship are some of the forms it can take (Ding, 2009).

Hall and Lew (2009) define a tourism resource as "that component of the environment (physical or social) which either attracts the tourist and/or provides the infrastructure necessary for the tourist experience" (2009, p. 35). Cultural tourism products are those that can be offered to tourists to help them explore local culture and participate in tourist activities to meet their cultural needs. According to Richards and Munster (2010), a cultural tourism product can be defined as a composition of the core product (e.g. monuments, cultural events, and local culture) and particular related cultural tourist services (e.g. information, education, general tourist facilities, transportation infrastructure). Hall and Lew (2009) define a cultural resource as any cultural substance that make a positive contribution to cultural tourism. It can be tangible or intangible and within a country, region, or area. Cultural tourism resources include cultural or natural factors that can motivate visitors to participate in cultural tourism and satisfy their cultural needs (Gan & Ma, 2000). These explanations are

integrated with the definition of experiential tourism in this research. Culture experience is one special experience people may have.

A cultural tourism resource has several features, which vary according to the uniqueness of a cultural destination. Ivanovic (2008) presents these as “cultural resources available within defined geographic areas that form a broad cultural base for tourism development” (p. 111). Different regions have distinct cultures and environments, and diverse cultural resources are formed within unique regional cultural settings in different regions. Further, they are conducive to tourism development. Ivanovic (2008) also claims that “cultural resources exemplify the sense of a place, which is different for every destination as each destination is the product of a different cultural process” (p. 111).

Cultural tourism resources are largely human inventions and often evolve over thousands of years. Mobility is a feature of cultural tourism resources, as is uniqueness (Chen, 2011). Different dynasties and countries have different levels of productivity. Culture has a significant influence on the cultural carriers such as buildings or parks created in a particular period (Chen, 2011).

Liu (2011) states that cultural tourism evolved in the tourism industry. The old cultural tourism model offered tourists a hurried and cursory glance at as many scenic features as possible. This traditional model no longer meets the psychological needs of modern visitors. Liu (2011) further explains that modern visitors come from a fast-paced living and working environment and seek relaxation in leisure tourism. Modern tourists want to experience a different pace of life as they participate in cultural tourism.

Cultural experiential tourism in the modern tourism industry combines many products. It includes sightseeing of buildings and important historical sites, participating in cultural events and local residents’ daily lives, playing local residents’ roles, and many other activities that help tourists imagine and enjoy the lifestyles of people from previous eras (Liu, 2011). Ancient towns, which are representative forms of cultural

tourism and the object of this study, are an important facet of Chinese cultural tourism, and are thus introduced below.

2.1.3 Ancient Towns — A Special Form of Cultural Tourism

As former economic and cultural centers, ancient towns are meaningful representations of human history and human civilization (Gong & Deng, 2011). They bear the material and spiritual cultural production of the people who live in the region (Lin, 2005).

Many countries have rich histories and enough cultural resources to attract international tourists (Raj et al., 2013), but China has a particularly important group of ancient towns because China was one of the four great ancient civilizations in the world (Gong & Deng, 2011). In recent years, ancient Chinese towns with abundant historical and cultural resources have become more developed for tourism (Gong & Deng, 2011). Consequently, a higher number of international tourists visit these towns every year to experience Chinese culture and its rich historical heritage. Ancient towns offer one form of cultural tourism, and many ancient towns in China have been developed with this goal in mind (Li & Sun, 2009).

Historical buildings are an important element of ancient towns; they provoke a sense of wonder and make visitors want to know more about related cultural products (Feilden, 2007). Because of increased tourist traffic, it is now essential to implement conservation plans to maintain the integrity and character of these cities. Feilden (2007) states: “Conservation is the action taken to prevent decay and manage change dynamically” (2007, p. 3). The conservation of historical buildings prolongs “the life of our cultural and natural heritage, the object being to present to those who use and look at historical buildings with wonder the artistic and human message that such buildings possess” (Feilden, 2007, p. 3). The historical buildings of ancient towns embody rich visible and invisible cultural heritage owing to their long history and lush culture. They

also combine local and exotic cultures (Ding, 2009).

2.1.4 Experiential Cultural Tourism in Ancient Towns

Modern visitors have complex expectations of their cultural tourism experiences. Not only do they want to see cultural sites such as historical buildings, but also to experience aspects of local cultural life (Liu, 2011). Visitors increasingly desire real connections with local residents as well as to experience a localized sense of place (Li, 2007). Li and Sun (2009) state that cultural tourism in ancient towns in China has evolved into experiential cultural tourism. Designers of these destinations have created experiential products and services that enable visitors to become immersed in the lives of local residents. Wearing the same type of clothing as the locals wear was one example (Li & Sun, 2009). Yan and Hu (2015) state that a cultural experience in ancient towns is quite different from the lives of modern visitors in their hometowns, which has a significant psychological impact on visitors.

Pine and Gilmore (2011) divide the products and services offered within ancient towns into four types: entertaining, educational, escapist, and esthetic. Each category is defined below.

Experiential tourism products in China focused on entertainment include many leisure activities such as fruit picking, traditional food tasting, pond fishing, and boating along the river. Local materials and technologies are utilized in these activities in ancient towns (You, 2013). Today, there are many theme parks for visitors to play traditional games. Parents bring their kids to play; there are child-centered rides, games, and adventure games that appeal to youths. These are examples of entertainment-style experiential tourism products (Wu, Li & Li, 2018).

Educational tourism products refer to ecological scientific research tourism, which is developed with the rich ecological resources of ancient towns to help visitors acquire new knowledge (You, 2013). Funk, Toohey, and Bruun (2007) explain that culture is

different across many areas and counties. Tourists can learn about these various cultures, as well as histories, thanks to educational tourism products. Many tourists are interested in such education tourism products. They like to participate in local cultural activities and events to learn about different cultures.

Escapist experiential tourism products allow visitors to experience ancient cultures or living environments as an escape from modern life. For instance, tourists can choose to live in a farmer's home and learn about the culture of ancient towns by participating in a variety of local activities. These activities are quite different from current pastimes (You, 2013), therefore enabling city residents to escape from their usual surroundings. People in modern societies are faced with work pressures, trifles in daily life, and complex interpersonal communication (Song & Sun, 2006). Because of these stresses, they have little time for self-reflection to evaluate their own feelings and desires. Therefore, many tourists long to shed their typical roles and dissociate from their daily stressors. They strive for a sense of tranquility and warmth in a beautiful and relaxed tourism environment. They exploit the potential of exciting tourism; they get a great deal of satisfaction through constantly challenging themselves and surpassing goals and experience feelings of comfort, pleasure, and selflessness (Song & Sun, 2006). For example, offering the experience of an idyllic life in a rural area provides tourists with an opportunity to relax in nature, and to find reprieve from the bustling city life (Song & Sun, 2006). Shows (2012) finds the escapist experiences within the tourism markets to be quite effective in increasing visitor satisfaction. In his research, he compared four types of tourism settings and found that visitors expressed a strong desire to escape from their current lives and to have a relaxing experience as they travel. The more stress visitors experience in their daily lives, the more useful the escapist experiences will be. Tourism products that provide esthetic experiences place more emphasis on ancient towns than the entertaining, educational, or escapist types (You, 2013). Because it is also intimately connected to the topic of this study, this category is explained in more detail

as follows.

Esthetic experience tourism can be divided into three broad categories. The first is reminiscent tourism, where people living in cities travel to more relaxing living spaces to seek experiences and memories reminiscent of the simple, slower-paced, country life (You, 2013). The second is the scenic sightseeing tour in which ancient architecture and traditional building patterns, as well as the integrated natural environment. The third category is the art appreciation tour. These themed entertainment programs are derived from the cultural characteristics of ancient towns, such as the entertainment programs of the small on-water stage in the ancient town of Xitang (You, 2013).

Tourists in the 21st century choose cultural tourism in ancient towns because they appreciated rural nature and ancient history. By experiencing the landscape and provincialism in ancient towns, visitors can realize their dreams of returning to a state before modern industrialization (Yan, Kang, Wang & Han, 2013). This is an important aspect of the Chinese tourism industry.

2.1.5 Authenticity

Although cultural experience is the core tourism product sold in ancient towns, You (2013) claims that visitors are still modern people who required convenience and high-quality service, and suggested that the products and services in ancient towns should be developed to meet the needs of modern visitors (You, 2013). As a result, cultural and historical heritage should be balanced with modern design. Obtaining this balance between historical authenticity and modern convenience presents a significant challenge. Yu (2008) argues that experiential cultural tourism in ancient towns should be more focused on traditional culture rather than modernization and tourism developers should control these commercial activities within ancient towns. In contrast, Wu and Zhang (2003) support innovation in the design of experiential carriers within ancient towns, and suggest that tourism developers should be more visitor-oriented. Tourism developers

should analyze the demand of visitors and create more experiential benefits for them by adding additional facilities, souvenirs, and sensory stimulations to ancient towns. Wu and Zhang (2003) support the addition of new elements that mix cultural heritage with modernization.

While stakeholders disagree on the best way to develop ancient towns, researchers agree that authenticity is an important factor that influences the quality of ancient towns, and the experience of visitors in the experiential cultural tourism process (Li & Zhang, 2007). Yu (2008) states that international tourists fly a long way to experience cultural tourism and expect to see real customs, traditions, and rituals in ancient towns. Some argue that the fact that many famous Chinese ancient towns display authenticity has increased their popularity (Lv & Huang, 2012). However, as Lv and Huang (2012) report, modernization and commercialization in many ancient towns in China has compromised their authenticity.

McKercher, McKercher, and Du Cros (2002) do not explore the issue of authenticity or modernization; rather, they emphasize visitor participation and argue that one of the most important aspects of experiential cultural tourism is to involve visitors in cultural experiences. Developers can design events and processes to motivate visitors to participate in local cultural activities. This approach is proven effective in many cultural tourism destinations (McKercher et al., 2002). Liu (2011) also claims that many developers of Chinese ancient towns understand the importance of visitor participation and have designed activities to motivate visitors to take part in local customs, festivals, and cultural events. Further, McKercher et al. (2002) state that visitor participation in local cultural activities can increase their level of satisfaction and enhance their memories.

2.2 Visitor Experience and Satisfaction

This section focuses on visitors. Many theories and studies demonstrate that visitors

are important in any analysis of the tourism industry. Their experiences and satisfaction levels directly influence their post-experience behavior, in particular, whether they recommend a certain site or excursion to others.

2.2.1 Visitor Experience and Satisfaction

Visitors are the customers of tourism organizations and destinations. Their behaviour is an important aspect that is studied by marketing experts and managers of tourism organizations and destinations alike (De Rojas & Camerero, 2008). From the perspective of visitors, experience in the tourism process is the combination of what they see, hear, feel and think. Visitor experiences include various features such as leisure, culture, education, and social interaction (Gilmore & Rentschler, 2002).

Visitor satisfaction is the positive emotional feeling visitors have both during and after their travels. A high level of visitor satisfaction indicates that the tourism products and services met the visitors' needs and expectations (Taplin, 2013). Before visitors arrive at a tourist destination, they have certain expectations such as the service quality, the entertainment facilities, and the environment. For instance, they would expect the service employees to treat them patiently and politely. They expect a clean and convenient environment, as well as clear signage in streets to direct them to areas of interest. Visitors have these expectations before they arrive at a destination, and after their visit, they compare their experience with their expectations. If the perceived tourism products and services were equal to or higher than their expectations, they feel satisfied; if they were lower, they feel dissatisfied (Alegre & Garau, 2010).

Zauner, Koller and Hatak (2015) advise marketing managers to design products and services with the customers' perspectives in mind rather than that of suppliers. The same holds true in the tourism sector; tourism developers should design products and services that satisfy visitors rather than suppliers (Jin, Lee & Lee, 2015). Developers should study what products and services the visitors value, and then offer the desired ones (Jin

et al., 2015). The more benefits customers have during their travels, the more satisfaction they feel (Jin et al., 2015). Here, the benefits might include time spent with family members or the various health benefits that stem from spending several weeks in a new environment. The needs of visitors are different, however, and developers can identify the major needs of their target customers, and then market specific products to those customers.

Visitor experience and satisfaction have been receiving more attention from scholars, who have found that high quality experiences and high levels of visitor satisfaction can prompt previous visitors to recommend tourism destinations to more potential tourists, thus attracting more visitors (Goulding, 2000; Lee, Yoon & Lee, 2007; Sim & Lee, 2013). Wei and Pan (2012) state that the sharing a visitor's experience with others (via face-to-face, mobile phone, internet blogs, or various forms of social media) is an effective barometer of the visitor's personal feelings throughout their trip. The experiences relayed by visitors can indicate their travelling needs and purpose, the nature of their interactions with local tourism organizations and residents, the views they found scenic in the area, and their feelings following tour activities (Wei & Pan, 2012). By reviewing visitor experiences that they shared on the internet, researchers found that visitors sometimes supply many details about their travel experience and emotions (satisfaction or dissatisfaction) (Tse & Zhang, 2013). Some of these details include specific aspects of tourism such as servers, other tourists, and local residents. Tourists also sometimes referred to tangible resources such as facilities, landscapes, buildings, food, and hotels, as well as intangible resources such as local culture, cultural heritage, service, knowledge, and spiritual advances (Tse & Zhang, 2013). Studying visitor experience is therefore valuable for both tourism developers and designers and for academic researchers (Tse & Zhang, 2013).

In light of the above findings, this study was based on the principle that by reviewing the experiences shared by visitors, one could derive findings that were

valuable to tourism developers and designers.

2.2.2 Visitor Needs in Cultural Tourism

In order to offer high-quality experiences to visitors and increase visitor satisfaction, tourism developers and designers should understand the needs of tourists within cultural tourism (De Rojas & Camarero, 2008). Zhang (2002) states that tourists choose to visit cultural tourism destinations because they want to learn something new and broaden their horizons, and because they find learning about different cultures enjoyable. Visitors are generally interested in learning about the customs that characterize the place they are visiting, and might enjoy visiting museums and engage locals in conversation to learn about their way of life. Anthropologists of tourism have identified this group as “tourists of ethnography” (Zhang, 2002). This tourist group supplemented their activities with participating in local life in order to understand the local culture (Zhang, 2002). The motivation to learn about new cultures differs among tourists. Plenty of visitors choose the educational means as well as interacting with the local culture.

The behavioural features and needs of modern tourists were described using three terms, namely personalization, participation, and cultural experience (Wang & Dong, 2008). Most importantly, modern tourists demand greater personalization. There are many tourism products to choose from, and the competition among tourism organizations is fierce. This results in an increased demand for personalized products and services (Wang & Dong, 2008). Secondly, modern tourists desire to participate and be more involved in tourism practices and events than ever before. They are no longer passive spectators; instead, they are participants of tourism products and services (Wang & Dong, 2008). Finally, the demand for cultural experiences has strengthened among modern tourists. They want to experience a life different from their usual daily grind, and cultural experiences meet this need (Wang & Dong, 2008).

According to Lord Cultural Resources (2009), cultural experiences have become the motivating factor for modern visitors to travel. The WTO (2004) also agrees that modern tourists have strong cultural needs. They are highly interested in participating in cultural tours and joining cultural festivals and events (McKercher et al., 2002). By participating in a cultural tour, visitors learn about a cultural fabric, or character, that is different from their own. This expands their worldview and increases their knowledge and insight (McKercher et al., 2002). Zhang (2002) also agrees that cultural tourism expands visitors' knowledge, educates visitors about history, and broadens their horizons. People have become very interested in cultural tourism trips today.

Ren (2009) argues that not all the visitors who participate in cultural tourism want education and new history knowledge. Some might simply seek a trip in a culturally different destination with diverse visitors. This aspect of travel indicates that one basic requirement of cultural tourism might be to generate happiness, rather than learning and/or education. Liu (2011) states that cultural events within the parameters of cultural tourism destinations that bring many people together might fill an inherent social need. Through participating in these activities, visitors can communicate with others with similar interests, an experience which is valued by many visitors. Zhang (2002) also found that some tourists enjoyed trying "exotic" foods and participating in fun cultural events, thus supporting Ren's 2009 contention that there is a market for happy experiences.

Visitors approach cultural tourism with varied needs. Due to this variety, the levels of visitor experience and satisfaction within the same ancient town in China can differ (Alegre & Garau, 2010). The following discussion illustrates this concept.

2.2.3 Visitor Experience and Satisfaction in Chinese Ancient Towns

Sightseeing-oriented ancient town tourism is no longer as appealing to tourists as it

once was, and modern tourists' experiences have become increasingly complex (Yan & Hu, 2015). Experience-oriented ancient town tourism is attracting more tourists that are modern because these destinations generate deeper and stronger psychological impressions (Yan & Hu, 2015). Existing empirical studies indicate that visitors to ancient towns consider these factors as impactful on their experiential quality.

2.2.3.1 Themes of Ancient Chinese Towns

Most visitors are interested in and motivated by the themes of these Chinese ancient towns (Liang, 2018). Each ancient town has its own unique features that embody a cultural heritage rich in history. These features are key selling points for most visitors. Looking at the case study of world-heritage tourism development in the ancient towns of Xidihongcun, Zhang and Dong (2006) point out that a clear theme that describes a destination and the visitor's expectations of the trip profoundly impress the visitor. For example, the features of ancient water towns are known to be very attractive to tourists and, because of this, the tourism theme of Zhouzhuang became "China's first water village" (Zhang & Dong, 2006). Zhouzhuang received more than 2.6 million tourists in 2004 (Zhang & Dong, 2006). Huanglongxi is another ancient town in China that has a clear, well-chosen theme. Huanglongxi's theme is "appreciating water in Huanglong Valley connecting ancient Shu" and has attracted thousands of visitors to this ancient town (Get News, 2016). Much research supports the notion that generating a distinctive theme enhances visitors' experience of and satisfaction with these ancient towns.

2.2.3.2 Authenticity

Authenticity serves as one of the important criteria of cultural tourism measurement (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). The main value of a heritage site lies in its accurate representation of past cultural traditions and scenes (Poria et al., 2003). Richards (2009) found that tourists appreciated visiting places that displayed local and authentic culture.

Along with the development of modern forms of tourism and changes in consumption patterns, visitors prefer to enjoy an authentic experience that gives them a greater sense of self-worth (Richards, 2009). The ancient water towns in China's Jiangnan are good examples. Jiangnan culture is a unique form of Chinese culture, and Jiangnan water towns are the most direct purveyors of the charming Jiangnan culture (Ruan & Yuan, 2008). Ancient water towns in Jiangnan record the area's cultural and spatial characteristics with more integrity, regional specificity, and diversity than most, and those characteristics that were created by the older generations will be carried forward and further developed from generation to generation (Ruan & Yuan, 2008). These ancient towns' widely acknowledged authenticity attracts thousands of visitors per year (Ruan & Yuan, 2008), and such examples demonstrate how authenticity affects a visitor's experience of and satisfaction with ancient towns.

Further, as Wong (2015) notes, cultural tourism visitors have different cultural needs. For those with high cultural needs, the perception of authenticity greatly enhances their experience. Those with lower cultural needs are less impacted by authenticity. Dai (2012) argues that many visitors travel to historical and ancient towns because they have strong cultural motivations. Lynch, Duinker, Sheehan, and Chute (2010) also support this viewpoint. Because authenticity is one of the key factors influencing visitor satisfaction, it is important for these towns to enhance their cultural authenticity.

2.2.3.3 Learning and Education

Acquiring knowledge about history and culture is one of the main needs of people visiting ancient towns. The extent to which cultural tourism destinations meet this need also influences visitor satisfaction. Tourists can gain a lot of historical knowledge from visiting ancient houses, temples, archways, and other buildings (Zhang & Dong, 2006). These are the material manifestations of ancient culture and historical events, and they interest a large number of cultural tourists (Zhang & Dong, 2006). Lynch et al. (2010)

illustrates a relationship between tourist satisfaction and the acquisition of new knowledge in the tourism process. They claim that satisfied visitors in cultural tourism destinations in Canada often refer to the acquisition of new knowledge about the local culture (Lynch et al., 2010). Local Canadian destinations effectively address the educational needs of tourists through storytelling and rich presentations (Lynch et al., 2010). Learning history and gaining cultural knowledge allows tourists to enjoy the cultural tourism experience and increase their levels of satisfaction.

Zhang and Dong's 2006 findings indicate that the same rule applies to ancient Chinese towns, noting that the guidance and education provided by tour guides and local residents in ancient Chinese towns significantly increases visitors' understanding of history and culture and thus positively influences their experience and satisfaction levels. Highly satisfied visitors in ancient towns are those who have effectively expanded their knowledge of the local history and culture (Zhang & Dong, 2006). Visitor satisfaction in ancient towns is thus increased when greater opportunities for learning and education are available.

2.2.3.4 Service Quality, Convenience, Comfort, and Safety

Pedersen (2002) states that while modern visitors to cultural tourism destinations demand a unique cultural experience, they also expect the same high-quality service they are accustomed to at home. Therefore, the quality of the facilities, guidance, transportation, restaurants, and accommodations also influences visitors' satisfaction with a cultural tourism destination. In ancient towns, managers should maintain the cultural heritage but also ensure the convenience of services, and the comfort and safety of visitors. These factors are no longer higher-level visitors' needs, but basic ones (Orbasli, 2000).

2.3 Sustainable Development of Tourism Destinations

Sustainable development of tourism destinations is the focus of this section. In this part, sustainable development issues in general tourism destinations are introduced, and then those specific to ancient towns are discussed. The existing or potential issues identified by scholars and researchers are presented below. These possible issues will be discussed in relation to the town of Wuzhen in the discussion section.

2.3.1 Tourism Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is increasingly emphasized by governments and by the WTO (Austrian National Tourist Office, 2012). Sustainable development in tourism is defined as a strategy used to keep a suitable balance between socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions in order to attain long-term sustainability in tourism development (Austrian National Tourist Office, 2012). The indicators that reveal the level of sustainability of a tourism destination are divided into three aspects, as noted by the Austrian National Tourist Office: socio-cultural, economic, and environmental (Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2014). Ancient town tourism attracts a great number of tourists with abundant historical resources and background. Income generated from this sector boosts local economic development and produces more revenue for local construction and development (Zhong, 2015). Moreover, the revenue generated by development within tourism also funds environmental renewal and protection. For example, Zhong's 2015 study of the ancient town of Xitang found that river regulation and sewage collection have been well planned and executed in Xitang. As a result, the local environment has greatly improved. From the perspective of socio-cultural impacts, local residents have opportunities to learn different culture and progressive ideas from tourists (Xing & Wang, 2006). Despite these advantages, the emergence of ancient town tourism also has negative side effects. The pace of putting protections in place lags in comparison to the rate of devastation, leading to continuous deterioration of the

ecological environment. A variety of wildlife is currently under threat, characteristic cultures of ethnic minorities are faced with assimilation, and many ancient buildings have been destroyed. In addition, people are unaware of the need to protect ancient relics, which leads to disorder in construction and renewal projects, which in turn becomes detrimental to ancient towns. The development and protection of ancient towns and the sustainable development of ancient towns are interdependent. Tourism attractions are based on the prerequisite of the protection of an ancient town, without which the goal of sustainable development cannot be achieved (Zhong, 2015).

2.3.1.1 Socio-cultural Sustainability

To achieve socio-cultural sustainability, the benefits to local residents and communities from tourism, as well as the satisfaction of visitors, has to be considered in the tourism development process (Lang, 2012). The training of employees for tourism organizations is also an important part of sustainability. Employee training improves the quality of service they provide, and has a positive impact on both employee and customer satisfaction (Lang, 2012). The previous segment explaining visitor experience notes that visitors sometimes refer to interactions with local residents and service employees when recommending destinations and attractions.

Ramos, Stoddart, and Chafe (2016) found that tourism development could bring social benefits to local residents. They interviewed local residents living in some destinations and found that these people like to communicate with visitors. Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011) also agree that tourism development can be valuable for local communities. In order to attract tourists to specific destinations, some local facilities are improved through development. This is beneficial to local communities as they, too, can enjoy the new facilities.

There are also socio-cultural risks that accompany such development. The introduction of new cultures into the host culture might conflict with or change the local

culture. For instance, in ancient towns in China, people are reluctant to transition to a modern way of life. If modern companies and facilities enter these destinations, they can change the lifestyles of people in these towns. People might feel uncomfortable with, or even reject, these modern companies. There might also be conflicts between local communities and modern companies entering ancient towns. Torabi-Farsani, Coelho, and Costa (2012) found that there is a strong desire among residents to preserve the local culture, and thus some groups are reluctant to embrace new companies arriving in their towns. This risk should be mitigated within the development process, and the local governments need to plan and implement a smooth process and educate the local people to use modern facilities. They also need to enlighten local people to the benefits of introducing new cultures into their existing lives (Hammond, 2013).

Besides the above risk, cross-cultural communication and interaction can also impede development. Tourism companies bring people with different cultural backgrounds to the same destination, and cultural differences among these groups can cause conflict. Local culture might be weakened, and artifacts risk being destroyed. This is another serious problem caused by tourism development (Bakir, Wickens, Boluk & Avgeli, 2017). In order to reduce this risk, it is necessary to educate tourists to respect local culture. It is also necessary for tour guides to act as intermediaries between people from different cultural backgrounds (Hammond, 2013).

In cultural tourism destinations, the preservation and presentation of local culture is an important part of socio-cultural sustainability. The Austrian National Tourist Office (2012) recommends that cultural tourism developers consider how best to present cultural heritage in a way that attracts visitors without significantly distorting it. However, the destruction of cultural artifacts and historical buildings is sometimes inevitable. It is difficult to determine whether this trend is socially beneficial or whether it poses a social problem (Cunliffe, Muhsen, & Lostal, 2016). On one hand, some historical buildings are not safe, so they should be destroyed or re-constructed to ensure

the safety of tourists and locals. On the other hand, cultural heritage is irreplaceable. Therefore, it is rational to evaluate the safety and cultural values of the old historical buildings and identify acceptable ways to maintain them.

Social-cultural sustainability is one important aspect of sustainability. Tourism has both a positive and negative impact on the local population. There are complex cultural issues in the process of tourism development. Tourism developers must consider the benefits and potential risks of any project.

2.3.1.2 Economic Sustainability

The concept of economic sustainability refers to there being sufficient market demand for tourism products and that these products meet the needs and desires of potential visitors (Austrian National Tourist Office, 2012). If both these conditions are met, tourism products usually produce economic benefits (Austrian National Tourist Office, 2012). Profits from tourism can then be reinvested to improve the tourism products, and to enhance the quality of life of local tourism operators and communities. If the economic revenues are lower than the operating costs, tourism destinations might fail (Travis, 2011).

Torre and Scarborough (2016) found that cultural tourism could bring economic benefits to local areas. The case of regional Victoria in Australia is one example of this trend. In one case, a local art event became a tourist destination; a greater number of visitors travelled specifically to participate in this local activity. Cultural tourism thus increased the event's revenue in this area (Torre & Scarborough, 2016). Rodrigo (2002) studied the case of ancient town tourism in Porto and Seguro in Brazil, and referred to the local residents' display of traditional culture in the form of commercial performances, souvenirs, and traditional handicrafts offered for purchase. These Australian and Brazilian examples demonstrate profitable economic activities in tourist destinations.

Gou and Zhou (2015) also found that tourism activities boost economic growth and promote investment. When local organizations make significant profits from selling products and services to visitors, they continue to invest more money to improve these goods. Such an approach constitutes a sustainable economic process. However, if the businesses within tourism destinations do not make profits, the product and service quality might gradually decline due to a lack of financial investment. Visitors then become dissatisfied and fewer will travel to the area (Travis, 2011).

Bosselmann and Chen (2003) state that tourism destinations and attraction sites should pay attention to their revenue and profits. If the rate of growth slows down, they need to consider adding new elements and tourism products to attract more tourists to the sites. Market orientation is needed within the sustainable development of tourism because economic benefits are an important factor in determining whether a tourist destination has been sustainably developed (Bosselmann & Chen, 2003). Aslan (2015) also claimed that tourism developers should measure the economic growth of various projects to ensure the economic sustainability of tourism destinations. Tourists' spending is influenced by the attractiveness of tourism products and services sold in tourism destinations (Aslan, 2015). Therefore, tourism developers need to continue to improve product and service quality to satisfy tourists and prompt them to make purchases as they travel.

2.3.1.3 Environmental Sustainability

Wu (2013) concludes that tourism resources should be well protected, and that sustainability should be reflected in the utilization of tourism resources. Numerous researchers have affirmed that position. For example, The Austrian National Tourist Office (2012) recommends that natural resources and energy be used “in such a way that they are able to renew themselves” (p. 2). Peeters and Landré (2011) specifically outline how all kinds of human activities related to tourism negatively affects the environment.

Roe, Hrymark, and Dimanche (2014) state that tourism-related construction, traffic, and transportation results in increased CO₂ emissions, which significantly affects the climate and pollutes the air. Further, garbage generated by humans can unbalance an ecological system. Therefore, when tourism developers build tourism products, buildings, and facilities, they should carefully measure the potential impact of these activities on the environment and the ecological system (Roe et al., 2014).

Wu (2013) further explained that the environmental capacity of scenic spots, the carrying capacity of resources, and the size of urban destinations should be considered in the tourism development and design process. If the number of visitors exceeds a destination's capacity, the environment will be damaged and significant pollution will occur. Ong, Storey, and Minnery (2011) found that the water quality in Boracay beach of the Philippines has declined due to the large number of visitors to this beach. Although the study is not about ancient towns, it suggests that environmental degradation is possible when a large number of tourists visit a particular location. Therefore, when ancient towns attract numerous tourists, there might be a negative impact on the environment.

The loss of biodiversity is another important environmental sustainability issue according to Malik, Shah, and Zaman (2016). When too many tourists visit a destination in a short period, the ecological system can be disturbed and negatively affect animals, leading to animal losses and broader imbalances within the ecosystem (Malik et al., 2016).

Environmental sustainability can be analyzed and evaluated from various perspectives, as indicated in Figure 5. This research includes the experiences shared by visitors about these aspects of environmental sustainability.



Figure 5. Sustainability framework used in this study

2.3.1.4 Stakeholder Perspective

Dogl and Behnam (2015) introduce another aspect of sustainable development. Stakeholder theory holds that sustainable development can maximize benefits for all stakeholders (defined as the individuals and organizations affected or impacted by the operations specified). Theobald and Zhang (2001) agree that stakeholder theory can be applied to sustainable tourism development and note that sustainable tourism can be improved by gathering major stakeholders together for the purposes of communication and education (Theobald & Zhang, 2001). If one project or program is design and implemented to provide benefits to all of the stakeholders, then the project/program is sustainable (Dogl & Behnam, 2015). However, the benefits to stakeholders might be contradictory with one another, that is, stakeholders might have competing and contradictory interests that are difficult to balance. In such a situation, under the principles of sustainability, organizations should try to balance and maximize the benefits.

Hörisch, Freeman, and Schaltegger (2014) expand upon the connection between stakeholder theory and sustainability. They claim that managing relationships between

stakeholders is an important aspect of sustainability management. If tourism organizations and governments would like to achieve sustainable development, they should be clear about the needs of each stakeholder, and ensure that stakeholders have positive relationships with one another. Positive relationships between stakeholders are conditions upon which sustainable development depends.

Sustainability has been widely discussed in the tourism industry because this industry has significant socio-cultural, economic, and environmental impacts, and relations among stakeholders in the tourism industry are complex. For example, Jeon, Kang and Desmarais (2016) note that local residents report lower quality of life during peak tourism periods, when the social relationships between visitors, tourism organizations, and local communities become stressed. The social benefits of tourism can decline for local residents during peak tourism times (Jeon et al., 2016). Further, during those times, the surplus of visitors can increase stress on the environment. While a surplus of visitors can negatively influence the quality of life within local communities and on the environment, it can also increase income for local residents (particularly for direct service providers) and can generate economic benefits for local communities. Given these factors, peak tourism times may cause more harm than good to communities. However, the development of cultural tourism resources is generally thought to be beneficial to local tourism development (Zhang, 2002). Not only can it generate significant economic benefits, but it can also enhance national pride and regional popularity, thus attracting more tourists (Zhang, 2002). The colorful ethnic culture of Yunnan province in China, for example, became an important resource for developing local tourism (Zhang, 2002).

Garvare and Johansson (2010) remind us that stakeholder theory includes the individuals and groups like tourists, local residents, tourism industry, and non-governmental organizations who might be impacted by programs, as well as those who might have an impact on programs themselves.

As this discussion demonstrates, the sustainable development of tourism destinations should be based on socio-cultural, economic, and environmental benefits. All are important and necessary features of sustainability (Burns & Sancho, 2003).

2.3.2 Sustainable Development Requirements of Ancient Towns

Culture significantly and deeply influences people's lives (Ding, 2009). Ancient towns play an important role in maintaining local customs and cultural heritage within the process of development. Furthermore, cultural inheritance can accelerate the development of cultural tourism and drive the local economy, improving the quality of life within the local community (Ding, 2009). The maintenance of cultural resources is essential for the sustainable development of tourism within ancient towns, and it involves protecting the town's original historical culture (Gong & Deng, 2011).

Yu and Zhou (2008) analyzed ancient town development in Sichuan and proposed that different types of ancient towns should have corresponding modes of development. They argue that tourism development in any ancient town should prioritize protecting the town's unique folk customs.

2.3.3 Sustainable Development Issues in Ancient Towns

In the context of ancient town tourism, protecting the cultural resources of ancient towns is actually the same as maintaining folk culture. Additionally, cultural carriers of folk culture, like traditional architecture, are also prone to deterioration or destruction over time (Ding, 2009). Thus, the protection of irreplaceable cultural resources is an important issue. Ding (2009) also argues that the preservation of cultural resources in ancient towns is essential not only to local tourism development but also for the cultural sustainability of ancient towns themselves. Cultural preservation is beneficial for sustainable tourism development in ancient towns in terms of ecological, economic, and social aspects (Austrian National Tourist Office, 2012; Chen, 2011). However, there are

some problems within the current development practices for ancient towns. As previously discussed, over-commercialization is one of these issues. In order to ensure that visitors experience convenience and receive high quality services, local tourism developers sometimes upgrade original roads, buildings, and facilities. For instance, modern tourists demand quality accommodations, so tourism organizations build modern hotels to meet this need. Some traditional buildings and facilities need to be destroyed and replaced by modern facilities because they were either not suitable for the intended purpose, or they did not fit in with the modern style of other new buildings. In the ancient town of Xizhou in Dali, an ancient building with Bai Nationality characteristics that dates back to 1920 was converted into a hotel (Ye, 2015). This type of infrastructure construction does have some positive outcomes. Zeng and Chen (2017) studied the ancient town of Xinchang in the Pudong area of Shanghai, and they identified a similar problem. The ancient town was not well protected, so they advocated for its preservation. Taken together, these studies show that commercialization of ancient towns changes their esthetic. This is not good for the preservation of these towns' cultural and historical heritage. Wang et al. (2007) also reported how commercial prosperity has diluted the original landscapes of ancient towns. According to the results of his research, most tourists think there are too many shops in ancient towns. This commercial infrastructure has transformed the original cityscape into stereotypical ones, without their once unique characteristics. Visitors said that they would no longer visit these ancient towns (Wang et al., 2007). The decrease in tourism will negatively affect the economic sustainability of ancient town tourism development. This study also revealed that commercial prosperity not only obscures the cultural content of ancient towns, it also dilutes the atmosphere and tourists' experiences (Wang et al., 2007). What's more, the excessive commercialization of ancient towns directly disturbs residents' daily lives and disrupts the harmony of the integrated humanistic ecosystem in towns (Wang et al., 2007). With the promotion of ancient town tourism, a great number

of shops become tourist-oriented instead of resident-oriented. Thus, a situation has been formed where businesses in ancient towns, though prosperous, cannot satisfy the demands of their residents (Wang et al., 2007). For instance, in Wuzhen, more than half of the residents think commercialization negatively affects their daily lives.

Over-commercialization is detrimental to ancient towns and their residents for a number of reasons. Chinese ancient towns play a significant role in authentically presenting human history and civilization, as well as preserving local culture and characteristics (Gong & Deng, 2011). Liu (2011) claims that the cultural atmosphere of some Chinese ancient towns disintegrates because of over-commercialization results in the town losing its charm. Sustainable development attempts to avoid these patterns. The ancient town of Xinchang (Zeng and Chen, 2017) is a dramatic example of poorly planned and unsustainable development. Here, the Shanghai government planned to develop this ancient town sustainably, but the actual development was poorly planned. As a result, Xinchang lost its indigenous culture. This is an important reminder that ancient towns cannot accommodate endless development, and that governments must control the level of commercialization in these ancient towns. Similarly, Wu (2015) shows that some governments rent ancient towns to companies for profit, but these governments do not strictly monitor the behavior of these companies. The result is that these companies do not protect valuable elements such as “living fossils”, and the towns suffer serious losses to their cultural heritage as a result.

Sustainable tourism requires a suitable balance between the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. “It attempts to minimize its impact on the environment and local culture so that it will be available for future generations, while contributing to generate income, employment, and the conservation of local ecosystems” (The Global Development Research Center, 2016, para.1). Sustainable development requires the maintenance of cultural benefits, while transformation may diminish those cultural benefits. The examples above show that

there are many negative aspects of development in ancient towns, even when sustainable development guides this process. We can potentially attribute these failures to governments' ignorance or to companies putting profits before cultural preservation. It should be noted, however, that the development of ancient towns would invariably change them. Positive and negative impacts might occur simultaneously, and governments and developers should try their best to minimize the negative impacts and maximize the positive impacts (Garvare & Johansson, 2010).

Moreover, Liu (2011) pointed out that some leaders and administrators of ancient towns in China lacked an awareness of sustainability. These leaders and administrators often seek quick success and instant benefits and, consequently, damage the traditional scenes of ancient towns, which causes a loss of cultural heritage. Abundant historical and cultural deposits are visible in ancient towns, but the attempt to combine these cultural deposits with modern tourists' expectation is challenging (Gong & Deng, 2011).

Along with the development of Chinese ancient towns, various issues such as modernization and commercialization have led to the loss of authenticity within these towns, which undermines cultural preservation and sustainability (Lv & Huang, 2012). Examples of modernization and commercialization include the reconstruction of old buildings and the addition of too many business activities. Li, Zhang, and Chen (2006) conducted a case study on the Chinese ancient water towns of Zhouzhuang and Tongli. According to their investigation, the commercialization of streets and the corresponding pollution of rivers has had a negative impact on the towns. Lin (2011) also claimed that the commercialization of ancient towns negatively affects authenticity. Many ancient towns have significant historical and cultural accumulations, which are compromised through development. As a result, it is necessary to find a balance between development and historical conservation in ancient towns. Lu (2001) insisted that protection is crucial, but he sees no significant conflict between development and historical conservation. In his view, the maintenance of ancient towns is a precondition for development, and

tourism development serves to protect and maintain those ancient towns (Lu, 2001).

2.4 Customer Knowledge

Customer knowledge is defined as a combination of values, insights, and experiences during the transaction and interaction process between customers and companies (Sain & Wilde, 2014). Once developers collect customer knowledge, they can plan the expansion of cultural sites with this in mind. Gebert, Geib, Kolbe, and Riempp (2002) state that customer knowledge can be classified into three types: knowledge about customers, knowledge for customers, and knowledge from customers. Modern companies found that customer knowledge could be used to identify the weaknesses and strengths of companies' products and services and to shape solutions to improve those products and services (Gebert et al., 2002).

In light of that definition, we understand that visitors' experiences in the tourism marketplace covers many aspects of tourism destinations in the present study. Visitors' experiences are the basis of customer knowledge about tourism destinations and local tourism organizations.

Studies of the tourism marketplace demonstrate that customer knowledge helps tourism organizations improve their performance. Liao, Chen, and Deng's 2010 research illustrates how tourism organizations effectively develop new tourism products by gathering customer knowledge. They found that the collection of customer perceptions and opinions of the tourism products and services is valuable data for tourism organizations to consider when making decisions. Here, customer knowledge refers to the combination of experience and insight about customers, which is collected and explored by companies. Fuchs, Höpken, and Lexhagen (2014) use the example of the tourism development process in Sweden, and show that the collection of tourist perceptions, experiences, and feelings enable tourism decision-makers to identify the potential needs of visitors. This can help them design and improve their marketing

practices, as well as tourism products and services. Stipanovic, Smoljic, and Primorac (2014) found that collecting feedback regarding experiences and satisfaction from customers helps tourism organizations improve the design of current services, generating more profit.

The sustainability concept suggests that organizations should create three types of benefits within communities: economic, social, and environmental. Customer knowledge helps tourism organizations identify sustainability problems and improve their tourism products and services so that they offer customers more value, contribute to society, and respect the environment. Curi (2013) notes that environmental protection and respect for human rights can both be taught. Through collecting tourists' experiences, local government can learn the development status and implement responsive education programs. Tsaur, Yen, and Chen (2010) also claim that collecting travellers' knowledge is useful for tourism development. For instance, through collecting customers' experiences, some tourism organizations found customers are interested in environmentally friendly materials. Following this finding, a company might decide to offer environmentally friendly shopping bags. As discussed in the section on visitors' experiences, tourists share their perceptions about many aspects of the destinations they visit. These visitors share information about the environment, society, local community, and entertainment centers, among others. Therefore, there is some evidence that customer knowledge in the tourism sector can guide tourism organizations to reshape their projects to make them more sustainable. For example, the Malaysian government conducted a survey about customer knowledge for one of its projects, and found that they should better protect the environment, particularly as customers are willing to pay more money for environmentally friendly products. This example shows the usefulness of collecting customer knowledge (Afroz, Masud, Akhtar, & Duasa, 2013).

Many factors affect visitor satisfaction, which can be analyzed from four different perspectives: the theme of the ancient town, authenticity, learning and education, and

service quality. A cultural destination's sustainability can be analyzed from three aspects: social, economic, and environmental aspects. The theoretical framework used in this research was designed to incorporate all of these features (Figure 6). Figure 6 presents the core model of this study. It is summarized based on the above literature review. Visitor experiences in cultural destinations and ancient towns come from many aspects. In this model, eight aspects are introduced. These aspects are widely discussed in previous empirical studies. From a theoretical perspective, visitor satisfaction is related to customer expectations and needs. The theories about visitor satisfaction have divided this measure into four categories. These four categories can strongly influence visitors' satisfaction in cultural destinations and ancient towns. Therefore, these four aspects are analyzed and discussed in the discussion chapter.

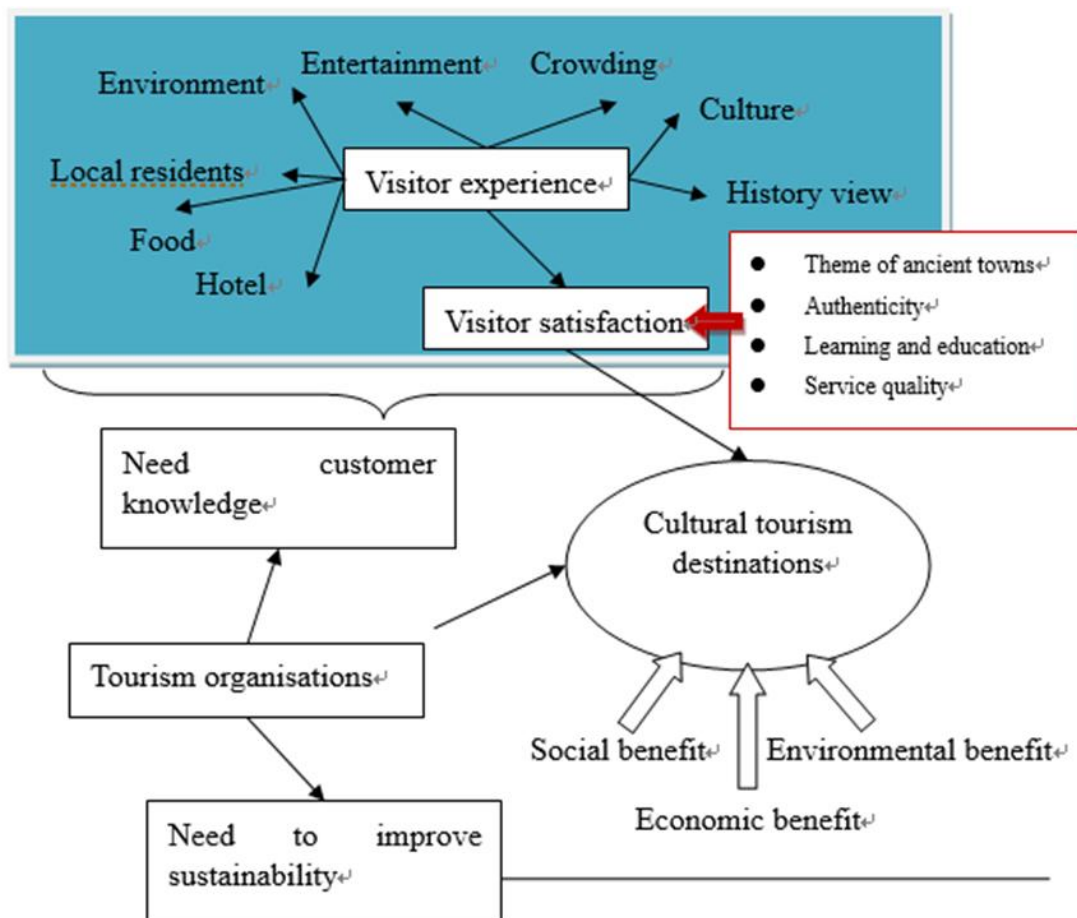


Figure 6. The framework used in the research and the relationship of the four concepts

presented in the literature review

The aim of this study is to serve tourism organizations that would like to make cultural destinations more sustainable. In order to achieve this objective, organizations must learn about customer knowledge. In order to evaluate the sustainability of the target destinations, tourism organizations should analyze the three areas impacted by tourism activities — social, economic, and environmental. Therefore, after collecting customer knowledge in this study, the researcher will analyze these findings from the three pillars of sustainability.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature and Summary

Theories addressing experiential tourism, visitor experience, the sustainable development of tourism destinations, and customer knowledge were introduced above. However, the metrics of customer experience and opinion are seldom used to analyze a destination's sustainability. This study addresses that gap.

Many factors motivate tourists to visit cultural tourism destinations. Based on the experiences they choose to share with others, conclusions can be drawn about which issues they consider important. In this chapter, four factors or themes were identified as being important to visitors in cultural tourism destinations such as ancient towns: the ancient town's theme, authenticity, learning and education, and service quality. When visitors share experiences related to these factors, they sometimes also mention their interaction with various people in the destination such as local residents and business operators. Sustainable development theory posits that stakeholder theory can also support sustainability. Since visitor experience includes various stakeholders, the analysis of visitor experience reflects many issues.

In fact, current studies show that there are still many issues related to sustainable development in Chinese ancient towns. It appears to be difficult to balance socio-cultural, economic, and environmental benefits in ancient towns, particularly as

authenticity and commercialization are often discussed in the academic field. However, few studies have analyzed sustainable development issues using an analysis of visitor experience. In other words, customer knowledge has not been widely applied to tourism development in China, despite its obvious value to cultural tourism development organizations there.

In this research, visitor experience in Chinese ancient towns is analyzed from socio-cultural, economic, and environmental perspectives; sustainability issues are also identified. Suggestions are offered for ways to improve the sustainability level of cultural tourism destinations in China. The next chapter outlines the research methods used.

CHAPTER 3

3. Methodology

This chapter describes the research design, the research methodology, the sampling strategy, the data collection process, the ethical considerations, and possible improvements that might be made to the research design. By examining visitors' perceptions of Wuzhen through their online reviews, the researcher explored visitors' perceptions of sustainability issues in Wuzhen. The research methodology used was content analysis, which “was used in order to analyse comments” with thematic word counts (Strijbos, Martens, & Prins, 2006, p. 2). Due to the variety of travellers' reviews on TripAdvisor.com addressing different issues from different perspectives, content analysis was the most effective way to analyze this data to discover underlying information — particularly issues related to sustainability.

3.1 Research Design

The research method used in this thesis was content analysis — a methodology that not only allowed the researcher analyze the text, but also to discern patterns of expressions in reviews, the frequency of those expressions, as well as the structure and discourses of communication. Content analysis has often been used to investigate customer behavior and, ultimately, to enhance researchers' understanding of the travel experience. Berg (2009) argues that content analysis should be used to discern patterns and theses, and Kolbe and Burnett (1991) outline that content analysis is an observational research method designed to examine the symbolic content of all types of recorded communications.

In this study, a qualitative content analysis was performed on online travellers' reviews posted to TripAdvisor.com regarding the Chinese accent town of Wuzhen. Specifically, traveller's reviews were analyzed and the frequency of keywords in their

reviews were counted. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, the research was guided by the six stages of qualitative content analysis (with slight modifications) delineated by Zhang and Wildemuth's (2009) design: data preparation, defining the unit of analysis, incorporating coding and categorization protocols, text coding, assessing the coding's consistency, and drawing results and findings from the coded data.

On the TripAdvisor website, travellers are invited to post ratings and reviews about specific tourist attractions. The scope of this research was limited to ratings and reviews related to the Wuzhen water town in China to facilitate the researchers' comprehension of travellers' experiences there to better predict their future intentions (as cited in Kapilevich, Karvounis, & Zagulova, 2016). The coding process generated the major keyword frequencies and the unwritten individual stereotypes or ideologies reflected by those reviewers' comments. The researcher then compared those results with the local government of Wuzhen's documents to understand how effective the 2014 rebuild and refreshment of the town was.

The data analysis incorporated both qualitative interpretation and quantitative analysis. According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004), a qualitative content analysis tells the researcher who said what, by which method, and who/what was being addressed; the quantitative process of content analysis allowed the researcher to conduct a frequency count of the major themes in travellers' reviews.

3.2 Setting and Population

The ancient Chinese town Wuzhen was chosen as the major target site of this study. As the most famous ancient Chinese water town in China, Wuzhen is one of the most commonly visited tourist attraction sites in southern China. This town was chosen as the major research site because it is one of the most famous ancient towns in China and reflects China's tourism industry. The second reason is that the researchers visited the

town and evaluated the participants' reviews based on the researcher's objective observation. The third reason is a significant reformation and refreshment of the infrastructure in Wuzhen was accomplished in 2014, intended to enhance visitors' experiences and meet the requirements of sustainable development. The purpose of this research was to assess visitors' perceptions of the various aspects of ancient towns.

The research population includes all the visitors to Wuzhen who posted reviews or comments on TripAdvisor.com after the 2014 renovation — since which the Wuzhen government has further enhanced the facilities and buildings to improve the tourist experience (Wuzhen Government, 2015) — until this research was conducted in 2017. Xinhua Net (2015) noted that this cultural destination seemed different in 2015. By taking this specific group of visitors as the research population, the designed research has the potential to grasp that populations' ideas about their travelling experiences from the most commonly used travel website, and to evaluate the effectiveness of this renovation. Therefore, the website provides the researcher with enough data to discuss the issue of sustainable development.

3.3 The Source of Data and the Sampling Process

As Kapilevich, Karvounis, and Zagulova suggested in 2016, “In the 21st century there appeared another possibility to reveal customers' needs and to research their evaluative judgments, viz. the use of the World Wide Web environment” (p. 2). They also recognized that there are some websites “where travelers share their impressions, evaluate tourism destinations and give recommendations” (Kapilevich, Karvounis, & Zagulova, 2016, p. 1). Since completing a full analysis of every opinion on the website would be far too time-consuming, the researcher decided to narrow the research population to those who have visited Wuzhen and posted on TripAdvisor.com.

After defining the context of this research, the researcher adopted the convenience sampling for this study, since the goal of this study was to determine whether the

renovation of Wuzhen was effective in improving the visitors' travelling experience. It was decided that conveniently sampled ratings and reviews from TripAdvisor after the reform was adequate to serve the research purpose, and can reveal the visitors' experiences accurately and indicate potential problems. As Pyo (2005) argues, using convenience-sampling methods is preferable because there is no way to pinpoint the experts' opinion from the research population. Similarly, for this research, the researcher could not establish a sampling standard based on the information revealed online. Therefore, in order to save time while meeting the research goals, the researcher collected all the ratings and reviews in both English and Chinese after the reform until the beginning of this research (from January 2015 to August 2017). In total, 234 participants' reviews and their satisfaction ratings were collected. Among the reviews sampled, only a small proportion (32.9%) wrote Chinese-language reviews. These reviews were translated into English verbatim, without any editing. Only Chinese and English reviews were used for the purpose of identifying travellers' experiences and potential areas of improvement, as these reviews provided sufficient research data.

The researcher chose to review travellers' comments posted on the TripAdvisor.com website for several reasons. A survey of US travellers conducted by PR Newswire in 2012 found that more than 75% of travellers liked to share their experience on social media sites, and TripAdvisor was one of the most popular of these (PR Newswire, 2012). A large number of visitors from many different countries share their travelling experiences on this website. According to Jeacle and Carter's (2011) findings, TripAdvisor is a generally trustworthy social media platform compared to other online platforms. TripAdvisor has a powerful operations system to ensure that most of the published reviews are from authentic patrons of the reviewed hotels or tourist attractions. In addition, TripAdvisor regularly evaluates the quality of reviews to ensure reliability. This particular study used TripAdvisor as the only source of research data due to its reputation for providing authentic ratings and reviews from users. Another major

reason for choosing the TripAdvisor website is its popularity among travellers around the world. The ease of use of the site's review system is another reason it was selected. Both positive and negative reviews are easily accessed through the website's clear and easy-to-navigate framework. As Downe-Wamboldt (1992) argues, any public negative or positive reviews made by various types of visitors about their experiences is significant to the respective companies and to subsequent customers. The ratings and reviews of a specific attraction can be taken as an effective pool of data that allows researchers and administrators to evaluate their costumers' experiences and the effectiveness of certain measures. The authenticity of online comments can also be guaranteed. As argued by Amaral, Tiago, and Kavoura (2015), a large proportion of internet users show reliability in their expressed intention to share their experiences in order to help other visitors make informed decisions. This indicates that collecting a large number of internet users' reviews can reduce bias and increase the data's reliability, and using reviews from one of the major travelling websites accomplishes that task.

The ratings from visitors from different cultures and backgrounds (ranging from one for poor service and unsatisfactory experiences to five for excellent service and experiences) was adopted as the first major research data. It provided the author with the potential to address the reliability issue that would facilitate a valid result in this study. Another major part of research data was the reviews form the selected research participants. These reviews enriched the study with more detailed information to reveal the visitors' experience. Photos that were taken by participants and shared on TripAdvisor were also included as they illustrate the environment and the situations described by customers, such as cleanliness, the extent of crowding, etc. As such, they support the participants' statements in the analysis chapter.

3.4 Data Analysis

According to Isaac and Budryte-Ausiejene (2015), analyzing visitors' reviews

about some tourism products is an effective way to explore their emotions and perceptions. Furthermore, Ballantyne et al. (2011) claim that collecting and analyzing visitors' reviews helps tourism developers identify the effectiveness of their products and service designs. This study included participants' comments shared on TripAdvisor and collected photos shared by those participants, thus allowing the researcher to analyze participants' feelings and perceptions.

The principal issues reflected in the reviews were identified by translating or transcribing the participants' reviews and then coding them. Content analysis revealed these participants' major viewpoints, experiences, or feelings, and these themes were then analyzed to identify potential links.

The literature review revealed four visitor experience and satisfaction factors: atmosphere, authenticity, learning and education, and service quality. The participants' reviews were evaluated based on these four major themes and the ten codes (authentic local atmosphere, historical architecture, commercialization and modernization, cost of hotels and inns, crowdedness, experiential activity, management of the scenic area, convenience of transportation, revisiting/recommendations, sanitation) outlined regarding the coding process of the research. The satisfaction levels of these participants were also counted and analyzed. As discussed in the data analysis section of this research, the goal of the coding process was to maintain consistency when analyzing the research data. In order to avoid potential confusion or misunderstanding, the previously mentioned codes and their definitions for this research are listed in the following table.

Table 1. Codes used to categorize the reviews based on the provided definitions

Codes	Definitions
Authentic local atmosphere	Sense of ancient southern Chinese culture
Historical architecture	Local buildings that represent traditional Chinese architecture
Commercialization and modernization	Non-culturally related travelling experience, especially in purchasing souvenirs and the convenience of living
Cost of hotels and inns	Experience of staying in local hotels and inns
Crowdedness	Number of visitors in the town
Experiential activity	Experience of tourist-involved activities
Management of the scenic area	Staff-related service and preparation on the site
Convince of transportation	Commuting within and outside the town
Revisiting/ recommendations	Level of recommendations to revisit again in a certain period
Sanitation	Environment and the tidiness of the town, the sites, and the hotels

From the ten codes, the researcher categorized the reviews and then analyzed the categorized reviews from the social, economic, and environmental perspective of sustainable development of tourist sites.

The frequency of keywords mentioned by the research participants was also analyzed. The collected 234 reviews were grouped based on the keywords used by the research participants. Ryan and Bernard (2003) note that interpreting customers' interests can be based on the frequency that they use topical words in online comments. The frequency with which words are used is of much importance to readers, and the

frequency of keywords gives researchers information regarding the travellers' specific perceptions of a particular site.

Base on the grouped participants' reviews, the researcher then summarized them in ten central topics that reflect the complete travelling experience in Wuzhen. Because the purpose of this research is to evaluate sustainable development in tourism, the summarized topics were cross-referenced with the framework of sustainability (social, environmental, and economical) and the number of related topics was reduced to ten. These included atmosphere, architecture, commercialization and modernization, transportation, cost, crowdedness, activities, management of the area, revisiting recommendation, and sanitation. Finally, the ten topics were developed into the ten codes used in the content analysis.

Since conducting a content analysis study requires a consistent analysis of the text, the coding process helped to "catalogue key concepts while preserving the context in which these concepts occur" (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007, p.176). Using the codes, the researcher designed a codebook to provide consistency in analyzing the reviews. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) argue, the most fundamental guidance for a content analysis method is coding the text from the data and establishing analysis and interpretation through that coded information. From the resulting coded labels and definitions, the researcher was able to group the reviews into different categories and then analyze the principal themes repeated in each category. The researcher then interpreted the reviews in reference to the key issues of sustainable tourism development in Wuzhen.

After identifying the codes, the researcher used content analysis to analyze the contents of each review since analyzing only the surface meaning of the participants' reviews was not sufficient (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2015). Further, Kassirjian (1977) suggested that systematization should be considered in content analysis. The findings should also have theoretical relevance to the research objectives. To achieve this objective of evaluating the sustainable development of Wuzhen, the researcher

viewed the participants' reviews as windows illustrating their travelling experience, in conformance with the customers' knowledge theory (Liao et al., 2010). The researcher cross-referenced the travelling experiences with the key elements of sustainable development and thus evaluated the Wuzhen tourist site.

3.5 Ethical and Validity Considerations

When conducting social research, ethical issues must be considered (Saunders et al., 2015). Several methods were used to protect the participants in this research. Firstly, the design and analysis of this research adhered to Vancouver Island University's code of ethics. All the collected data are from open-access information on the TripAdvisor website. The researcher did not have access to the participants' private registration information from TripAdvisor. Because there was no direct contact with the participants and only public information was used, the participants' consent was not required. The participants' right to privacy was also not breached as the researcher did not have access to their personal information and their TripAdvisor username information was not included. All the participants whose reviews were included in this research remained anonymous.

Researchers were also cautioned not to disclose related information or to "take sides" in their opinions (Creswell, 2014) during the data analysis process. For this research, taking sides would lead to the researcher having a biased opinion and affecting the validity of the research. All the researched reviews were objectively transcribed and analyzed, and related information regarding the travellers sampled was protected.

Several procedures ensured the validity of this research. First, both Chinese and English reviews were collected to achieve an acceptable level of data triangulation. The data was crosschecked to determine whether a particular viewpoint mentioned in reviews in one language was addressed in a review in the other language. Secondly, after the information was analyzed, the researcher added detailed descriptions to convey the

findings, thus adding validity to the research (Creswell, 2014). The researcher provided all related details of the analyzed travellers' reviews, including pictures, ratings, and reviews, to ensure that the research analysis remained truthful to the original data.

3.6 Research Reflexivity

As a Chinese student examining travellers' experiences of China, it is difficult to be 100% objective. An unconscious admiration for one's native land could potentially introduce bias or prompt a researcher to take sides when analyzing reviews, particularly if the desired answers or expressions were not revealed in the posted reviews. My perceptions and understanding garnered from previous travelling experiences in Wuzhen, including preconceptions regarding the tourist site management and other issues that were researched, could potentially bias this analysis, as well. Finally, the ideologies of Chinese tourists would likely differ from those of visitors from other cultures. Most importantly, my studies in the field of sustainable leisure management provide insight from a professional perspective and add theoretical knowledge to the research conducted.

Because the issue of tourist attractions' sustainability has not been thoroughly researched or properly considered, my graduate study and this thesis research provide the opportunity to review one ancient Chinese town and offer suggestions for improvement based on the knowledge acquired during my graduate studies.

CHAPTER 4

4. Results

This research collected and analyzed 234 participants' reviews posted on TripAdvisor about the ancient town of Wuzhen. This chapter presents the findings of the analysis of that commentary as well as the participants' satisfaction levels. Their TripAdvisor reviews reflect their experiences, perceptions, and satisfaction levels. The analysis of their reviews and the identification of common threads regarding this destination also afforded the opportunity to explore aspects of Wuzhen's sustainable development.

The triple bottom-line framework of sustainability was used. The first task was to measure the average satisfaction level of participants. The relative themes under each aspect of sustainability were then analyzed before the major findings from the participants' reviews were summarized. The researcher followed the thematic analysis method and tried to reduce personal bias. The reviews of 234 participants were analyzed individually and their keywords and key points were identified.

4.1 Participants Profiles

TripAdvisor assigns different levels to its users based on the extent of their involvement and the number of years spent on the website. Higher levels directly reflect how long they have used TripAdvisor and the number and extent of the reviews they provide. Most of the reviews used in this study were submitted by TripAdvisor's higher-level participants, those defined as having used TripAdvisor for more than five years. As experienced participants, the reviewers offered this research more value since those reviewers would unconsciously make comparisons to other similar sites as they provided ratings. Figure 7 shows the relative share of each group accorded different levels on the TripAdvisor website. The majority of participants (74%) fell within the top three

TripAdvisor categories, which means most of them have been engaged with TripAdvisor for more than four years. This reflects a high degree of reliability. Below, in the citations of the reviews left on the site by these participants, information regarding the participants is displayed based on their TripAdvisor name and levels, age range, gender identity, and country of origin.

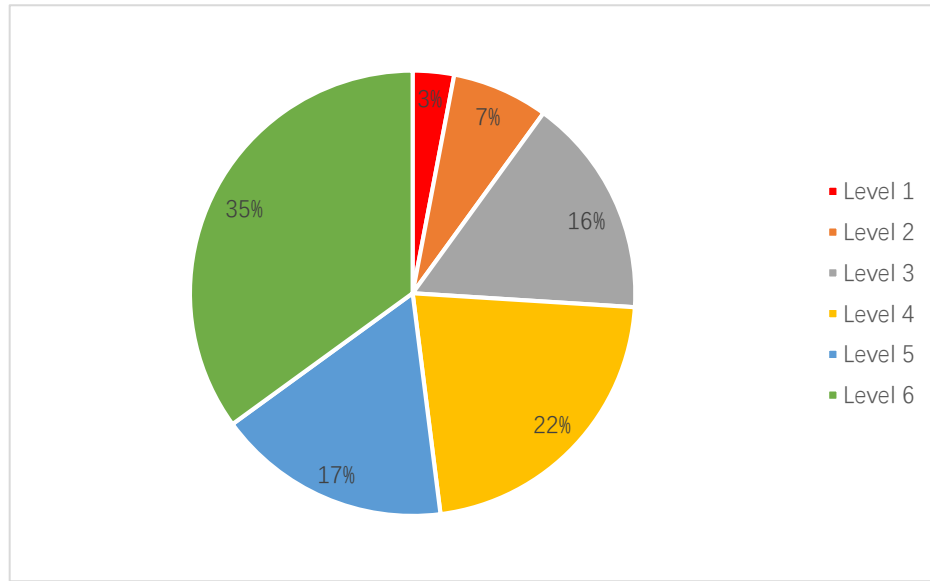


Figure 7. Experience level of this study's TripAdvisor participants

Table 2 shows that 25.4% of the participants had been members of TripAdvisor since 2015, 18.1% since 2016, and nearly 10% since 2014. The findings of those who have been engaged with TripAdvisor for more than four years were integrated for the purposes of this research, as the viewpoints of these participants were considered most useful.

Table 2. Year in which participants became members of TripAdvisor

Year of Enrolment	Portion of Sample (%)
2003	0.4
2004	0.9
2005	1.7
2006	1.3
2007	4.7
2008	3.9
2009	4.3
2010	2.6
2011	7.8
2012	6.9
2013	6.0
2014	9.9
2015	25.4
2016	18.1
2017	6.0

4.2 Participants' Satisfaction Levels Regarding Wuzhen

Participants on TripAdvisor use stars to indicate their satisfaction levels. Reviews range from one star (very poor) to five stars (excellent). All of the 234 participants

identified in this study rated their satisfaction by using the star rating. Figure 8 illustrates that 58% of the participants gave Wuzhen five stars and 31% of the participants gave it four. Only a few participants (3%) gave Wuzhen just one or two stars. This indicates that the majority of the participants who travelled to Wuzhen were satisfied with this destination.

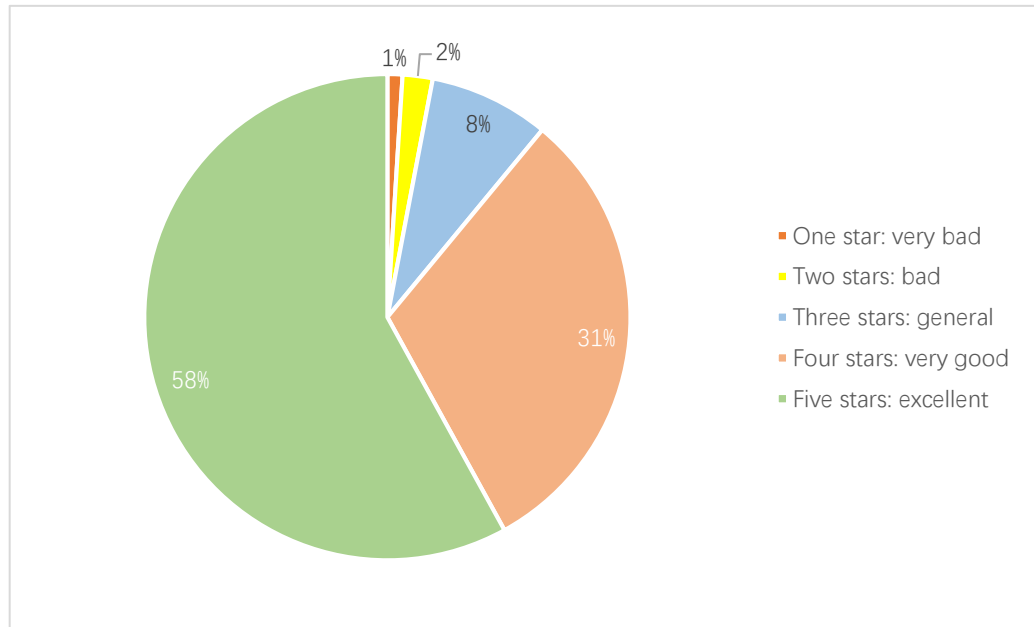


Figure 8. Participants' levels of satisfaction with Wuzhen

4.3 Participants Experience Findings

The social, environmental, and economic aspects were analyzed individually. From the analysis of the participants' reviews, ten key themes were identified. These ten major themes were then classified into different aspects, which are described in the following sections.

4.3.1 Social

4.3.1.1 The town was crowded on weekends and holidays

Among the 234 participants, 55 mentioned crowding in Wuzhen. They noted that

the town was full of people and that they waited a long time for things like food and drink. The crowding experience made some of them feel slightly dissatisfied, and a few were very dissatisfied. Many suggested that the experience would be improved if the town were less crowded. Some representative examples of reviews offered by participants about the experience of dealing with the crowds in Wuzhen follow:

“This place was insane crazy busy. Wall to wall people. We expect to see beautiful views, but I never expect there are many people. There are a lot of people in the town and sometimes we cannot even get close to the spots we want to see.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2004, 50–60-year-old woman from Orange Park, Florida*)

“The west scenic spot was a lot more crowded. You cannot image how crowded it is. There are too many Chinese people there.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009, from Guangzhou, China*)

“I struggled to follow our tour guide through the huge crowd instead of spending time exploring. Therefore, I found it is a waste of time. I have not enjoyed the views and the stores. I found there are many interesting stores and I want to enter them. However, because there are too many people, I cannot slowly appreciate those products.” (Figure 9) (*Level 5 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009, woman from New Zealand*)



Figure 9. Photo of crowding at one Wuzhen attraction taken by a participant

It was calculated that the words “crowd”, “crowds”, and “crowded” appeared in participants’ reviews 119 times by nearly 80 participants. Crowding has become a crucially unsatisfying feature of Wuzhen. A higher proportion of non-Chinese than

Chinese participants talked about overcrowding in their reviews. Some Chinese participants said the place was crowded but acceptable. Chinese visitors appeared to be more accustomed to such conditions.

Only a small proportion of participants claimed that the town was not crowded, and they often explained that they visited on weekdays or during non-holiday periods. Some had consulted TripAdvisor and summarized that Wuzhen would be full of people on weekends and holidays, so they planned their visit for another time. From these people's reviews, it is evident that TripAdvisor is useful for these people to make tourism plans, illustrating TripAdvisor's value.

Many participants strongly suggested that they could have better enjoyed the town if they chose non-weekend and non-holiday periods. Wuzhen's crowds on weekends and holidays dissatisfied a certain number of participants. These participants expected to see many interesting stores and places in Wuzhen but they could not enjoy their visit due to the crowds; only having time for a quick glance and then having to move on to the next station did not meet their expectations.

4.3.1.2 Authentic local atmosphere was perceived from different views

In addition to beautiful views of the waters around Wuzhen, nearly a quarter of the participants (n=60) mentioned the authenticity of the local atmosphere in Wuzhen's water town that was exhibited by the local residents living there and by Wuzhen's old buildings and other elements. Both seemed to make participants feel they had entered an old place and an old era.

These participants stayed with the local residents and saw how they lived from day to day. Through observing the lifestyle of local residents or interacting regularly with them, the participants experienced an authentic local atmosphere. In addition to the local residents, participants reflected upon the many old buildings, townships, canals, and museums, which brought them back to ancient times. Some representative reviews left

by participants who were impressed by the authentic local atmosphere of Wuzhen are as follows:

“It still maintains its historical atmosphere as the dwellings are kept in their original order.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014, man from Hong Kong, China*)

“It will let the contributors feel like they came back to the old time. From the buildings to the clothes of local residents, sometimes I feel like that I am not in the modern time, but the old time.” (*Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, man from Taipei, Taiwan*)

“There are various exhibitions showing the old way of life in this water town. I see more than ten exhibitions and these exhibitions are interesting (Figure 10). There are people introducing the history and the relative cultural knowledge. There are also videos which are in both Chinese and English, so that I can understand these videos effectively.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, man from Singapore*)



Figure 10. Photo of an interesting exhibition in Wuzhen taken by a participant

“The old part is the authentic village with a few craft venues selling good quality silk. There are also people sitting in front of their stores showing how to make

clothes with old machines. I stood there and watched an old lady making clothes. She even told me how to make the clothes and invited me to try the old time machine. This is impressive. I purchased one piece of scarf from this old lady's store to remember this experience." (*Level 5 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009, from Cheshire, UK*)

In addition to the authentic local atmosphere, many participants mentioned the historical architecture. Among the 234 participants, 50 of them specifically mentioned how well Wuzhen's historical architecture has been preserved. Some representative reviews from these participants are as follows:

"I would say that if you like old Chinese architecture, it's a must see. They are preserved well and it seems as old as it is really is. I think five hundred years ago, these buildings and bridges have been here (see Figure 11). Now, we can walk on them. The local government protected these resources well so that we have chance to see them, touch them, and feel them." (*Level 1 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016, 25–34-year-old man from Shenzhen, China*)



Figure 11. Photo of preserved Chinese architecture in Wuzhen taken by a participant

“The old buildings, bridges, willows fluttering, really the same as in ancient times. The tour [guide] also told us that these buildings and bridges have been preserved well by the local tourism organization and government.” (*Level 3 contributor; TripAdvisor member since 2016*)

“The town itself is beautifully preserved. It is not just old, but also beautiful. This is another kind of beauty and I like it. It is distinctive from the views in our country.” (*Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, 18–24-year-old woman from Crossmolina, Ireland*)

“Some of the architectures look old but well preserved. Although it is old, in my eyes it is very beautiful (see Figure 12). I took a lot of pictures in this town that day. If you arrive here, you would understand my feeling.” (*Level 5 contributor; TripAdvisor member since 2008, 25–34-year-old woman from Ipoh, Malaysia*)



Figure 12. Photo of “beautiful” architecture in Wuzhen taken by a participant

These reviews indicate that many participants perceived the old buildings in Wuzhen as authentic. They liked the historical buildings and held positive evaluations of the local government’s preservation efforts.

A small proportion of participants thought the historical buildings were no longer authentic. For instance, one said, “The town is no longer inhabited by local people so it is not an “authentic town” (*Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014, from Dallas, Texas*). From this participant’s perspective, many businesspersons created commercial tourism businesses in the town, and many local residents had sold their houses and moved to other cities. Another participant said “they appear to have sanitized all the buildings with the same roof tiles and reworked all the wood in every house and rebuilt every wall ... In short, they removed any feeling of authenticity to the place”

(*Level 1 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014*). Another participant said this about the rebuilt buildings and sports in Wuzhen: “In the morning we visited the West side, which was renovated in 2007, so it’s probably better to think of it as an imagined reconstruction rather than a genuine historical site” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2006, 50–64-year-old man from Athens, Georgia*).

As these reviews illustrate, some rebuilt places in Wuzhen were not perceived as authentic in the eyes of a small number of the 234 participants. However, most participants perceived Wuzhen as being authentic.

Another concern related to authenticity was over-commercialization. Among the 234 participants, 25 participants noted that there were too many shops, hotels, and restaurants in Wuzhen. Some typical reviews that reflect this aspect of inauthenticity are as follows:

“West area is too commercialized. Most of the West area is occupied by hostels.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2013, from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*)

“It has become commercialized.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2007, 65+-year-old woman from San Francisco, California*)

“Somehow, the East Village felt more commercialized as there were many shops that were selling merchandise near the entrance.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2006, 35–49-year-old woman from Singapore*)

“There is a light show at night but it is very commercial and less interesting for me.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2008, 50–64-year-old woman from Singapore*)

Despite these people’s opinions about over-commercialization in Wuzhen, most of their customer satisfaction levels were either four or five stars, indicating that this level of commercialization did not make them feel dissatisfied. Overall, they accepted these commercialized buildings, shops, and restaurants. Some participants claimed that these

designs are useful and that the commercialization made their trip convenient and easy.

By comparing the relatively small number of consumers who discussed authenticity and over-commercialization with the majority who either did not mention that aspect or who spoke positively of the improvements, it was determined that Wuzhen was not perceived as over-commercialized in general. Therefore, authenticity is well retained in most visitors' eyes.

4.3.1.3 Convenient Transportation

Among the 234 participants, 49 participants mentioned the convenience of transportation, both within the town itself and to and from the town of Wuzhen. Following are some representative reviews regarding participants' satisfaction with the convenience of transportation:

“A large bus transports contributors from East to West and vice versa for free.”
(*Level 3 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014, from Los Angeles, California*)

“There was a boat taking us from the entrance of the town to the water town. The boat was free of charge because we stayed in the hotel resort.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2008, from Foshan, China*)

“There are buses travelling between East and West area for free provided you still keep the entrance ticket.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2013, from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*)

The word “free” was mentioned frequently in reviews related to transportation facilities that helped participants travel within the town of Wuzhen, and many participants said they were satisfied with Wuzhen's free, convenient transportation service. The following are some reviews made by participants regarding the convenient transportation options available between Wuzhen and nearby destinations:

“If you come from Shanghai, take a bullet train to Tongxiang from the Hongqiao station, jump on the K282 (¥5 per person) right outside the railway station until the

last stop, and then you can take k350 (¥2 per person) to either the east or west.”
(*Level 1 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016, 25–34-year-old man from Shenzhen, China*)

“2 hours drive from Shanghai can easily be done over the day. Worth the time.”
(*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016, from Shanghai, China*)

“You can take public bus K 305 to the last stop that is the Wuzhen Westgate Watertown contributor reception center, it took about 10 minutes only.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2013, 35–49-year-old man from Johor Bahru, Malaysia*)

Few participants complained about the transportation options provided in Wuzhen. From reviews left regarding free transportation inside Wuzhen and between Wuzhen and the rest of China, it was concluded that Wuzhen has designed its transportation service well. Participants were satisfied with this experience.

4.3.1.4 Good Experiential Activities in Wuzhen

Among the experiences shared by these TripAdvisor participants, the boat ride was frequently mentioned; some even ranked it as their best experience in Wuzhen.

“The best part of the tour is probably the boat ride (additional 30 yuan). U are away from the crowd and watch (or be watched) by the crowds from the banks. The only chance u can capture and admire the beauty of Wuzhen from a little distance, with the exception of having other 7 passengers in the boat.” (*Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2008, 25–34-year-old woman from Singapore, Singapore*)

“We did the old East side first and saw the bed museum and took a relaxing boat ride.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, 35–49-year-old woman from Shanghai Region, China*)

“My favorite part of the visit was the boat ride which lasted for around 20–30

minutes and cost 30RMB.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009, from Guangzhou, China*)

“Taking a boat night and watching the shimmering reflections was the highlight of our tour.” (*Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016*)

“It was an amazing experience to go on a boat around Wuzhen Water Town.” (*Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009, 65+-year-old man from Bridgend, United Kingdom*)

Of the 234 participants whose experiences were analyzed in this research, 60 participants mentioned enjoying positive experiential activities in Wuzhen and most mentioned this boat ride. Many recommended this experience to other participants visiting Wuzhen.

“You can take a ride on the canals through the town or stop to watch how silk is made, see how soy sauce is made or the pans for cooking.” (*Level 3 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2013, from Helsinki, Finland*)

“I recommend it in the night really excited I like that boat trip.” (*Level 3 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015*)

The suggestions offered by participants clearly indicated a high level of satisfaction with this boat ride experience, but participants also mentioned other kinds of experiences in Wuzhen, including museums, art festivals, street entertainment, and live theatre. The range of activities mentioned shows that Wuzhen has designed many kinds of experiential products for participants to enjoy. An example is the museum, which 32 participants discussed. Many enjoyed visiting the various small museums in Wuzhen one after another to learn about the town’s culture and history, as the following reviews illustrate:

“Interesting museums learning the history of the area and local author.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, man from Zionsville, Indiana*)

“There was a lot of small museums and different things to see.” (*Level 6 contributor,*

TripAdvisor member since 2009, from Guangzhou, China)

“The foot binding museum was actually quite interesting.” *(Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2011, from Beijing)*

“There are some fascinating exhibits inside the crowded museums and enough to keep someone interested for the better part of the day. I was amazed at the dye process available as well as the coin museum. It was very strange as foreign currency was also on exhibit and I'm talking about pennies and quarters.” *(Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014, man from Leawood, Kansas)*

Most of the participants who were impressed by the boat ride experience like to have a relaxing time, while most who were impressed by the museum experience like to learn new things about culture and history. Wuzhen has different kinds of experiential products to meet the various needs of participants.

4.3.1.5 Small museum experience is impressive

Among the 234 participants, 30 participants mentioned the small museum experiences in Wuzhen. Some participants were quite impressed by the many small museums in Wuzhen claiming that they learned a lot from reviewing the artefacts and enjoyed this process very much.

“Major attractions are museum of ancient beds, museum of folk customs (see Figure 13), Mao Dun museum, Fanglu Pavilion, blue print dye house, winery, wood engravings, etc. I easily spent 3 hours there.” *(Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, man from Singapore)*



Figure 13. Photograph of museum of folk customs taken by a participant

“The exhibitions of Jiangnan 100 bed Museum, Dye House and Wood Carving Museum are great.” (*TripAdvisor member since 2017, from Yuyao, Zhejiang*)

“East village is smaller than West village but has many theme oriented museums to visit: ancient beds, MuXin's [local hero, writer-artist] former residence, historic pharmacy, wedding, wine brewery, blue calico, wood carving. West village is larger where there is a new performance center, MuXin Museum, foot binding museum, and loads of restaurants.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2007, 65+-year-old woman from San Francisco, California*)

These participants enjoyed the experience of visiting the small museums, but the majority of the participants did not mention them at all. This shows that museums are attractive to only some participants. Some participants went so far as to say that they found the small museums ugly. One participant scored his satisfaction level as very low, saying “some old houses are converted into little museums, but these exhibits are poor quality and all very ugly.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2011, 25–34-year-old man from Singapore*). This review highlights this participant’s dissatisfaction with the small museums. Most of the visitors to Wuzhen who contributed were more

interested in the beautiful views than in the museums.

4.3.1.6 Comprehensive Tourism Facilities

The last participant experience analyzed was Wuzhen's comprehensive tourism facilities. Fifty-three of the 234 participants were impressed and satisfied by the facilities in Wuzhen, as the following reviews indicate:

“The tourism facilities in Wuzhen are very comprehensive and convenient. The maps, instructions, and routes are planned well.” (*Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2012, woman from Taipei, Taiwan*)

“The English at the site provides decent translations for both the descriptions and directions and there is a boat provided free of charge as soon as you leave the contributor center.” (*Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014, man from Leawood, Kansas*)

“It's old China with some updated conveniences.” (*Level 1 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016, 25–34-year-old man from Shenzhen, China*)

“Even restaurants, bars are curated. Simply amazing, super curated, with focus on details.” (*Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014, from Shanghai, China*)

These reviews clarify that even English-speaking TripAdvisor participants appreciated and were impressed by the convenience of Wuzhen's clear tourist information and supportive facilities. In their view, Wuzhen had done much better than other cultural tourism destinations in China.

4.3.1.7 Summary of Social Aspect

Based on the seven themes described above, this research found that Wuzhen offered rich social benefits to tourists. This cultural destination successfully created cultural or experiential benefits for visitors, and this important foundation supports

sustainable development.

4.3.2 Environmental Aspect

4.3.2.1 Beautiful Views in Wuzhen

Although some participants complained about the crowds in Wuzhen, most were impressed by this cultural destination's beautiful views. Wuzhen's natural splendor seemed to compensate for its crowds and was a major reason why many people still evaluated Wuzhen as a four- or five-star destination. Wuzhen's high overall ratings indicate that participants believed it was a worthwhile travel destination.

The frequency with which the words "beautiful" and "beauty" appeared in the reviews left by the 234 Wuzhen participants was calculated; nearly 120 participants mentioned them 182 times. The beautiful views mentioned by the participants include the river, ancient wooden houses, night light views, and the water/boat/bridge. As the following examples indicate, some participants praised Wuzhen quite highly and without hesitation:

"Such a beautiful water town with true taste of ancient Chinese village life. The night view in this town was impressive and I believe that photographers will love this place (see Figure 14). All I can say is that Wuzhen is one of the most unique places that I have visited so far." (*Level 5 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2008, 25–34-year-old woman from Ipoh, Malaysia*)



Figure 14. Photo of “beautiful” water town taken by a participant

“No wonder it's called the Venice of China, The town is made up of rivers for roads. It was beautiful.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015*)

Twenty-four participants’ evaluations described Wuzhen as “the Venice of China,” thus confirming the quality of water views in Wuzhen and their satisfaction with them. Beautiful views of the water and the unique lighting of the water town setting at night both impressed and satisfied visitors. Wuzhen’s water views and night views were mentioned most often in the participants’ reviews, and they left a lasting impression.

4.3.2.2 Clean Environment

Close to 50 of the 234 participants mentioned the streets and public places in Wuzhen. Of those 50 participants, 45 reviewed them positively, stating that Wuzhen is clean and the environment is good, as can be seen from the following examples:

“Public toilets in the Watertown are clean and modern.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2004, from Hong Kong, China*)

“The whole atmosphere in the west area is very good. The toilets are clean like nowhere else in China.” (*Level 5 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015,*

woman from Germany)

“Clean beautiful and dreamy. Nice to take the night boat tour, but also good for walking during the day.” (*Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2010, from Mandaluyong*)

Five participants disagreed, saying that the environment was terrible. For instance, one said, “toilets as usual are terribly dirty.” This small group of participants indicated that the environment in some areas was not well managed. However, the majority of the places were rated as well protected, with a satisfying environment.

4.3.2.3 Summary of Environmental Aspect

Natural resources were considered well preserved in Wuzhen. It seemed that the tourism government has largely recognized the importance of environmental aspects in this destination’s sustainable development process. Only a few tourists mentioned that some places were not clean. The local tourism organizations and governments should take notice of those reviews, but generally, both Wuzhen’s environmental and social aspects are sustainable.

4.3.3 Economic Aspect

4.3.3.1 Price is Reasonable

Participants paid for items such as tour tickets, food, accommodations, entertainment, and museums in Wuzhen. Among the 234 participants, 48 participants reviewed the prices of these products and services. Only 21 participants found them expensive, as was evidenced by reviews such as these:

“Be prepared to be overly generous with anything you pay (medium quality food is priced twice as much as it would be outside the town).” (*Joana R, Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014, 25–34-year-old from Lisbon, Portugal*)

“Pricing is on the high side.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2004,*

from Hong Kong, China)

“If you sleep in the East or West Scenic Area, you may not pay the attraction entrance (to be checked), which is expensive.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009, 35–49-year-old man from Sao Paulo, SP*)

“Ticket a little bit expensive, 150 yuan for 2 side.” (*Level 1 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016*)

“Tickets are expensive, 280 yuan per person. There is a characteristic sell snacks street, snacks not worth trying. Because they do not feel authentic, and the price is expensive.” (*Level 3 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016*)

The number of participants who reported that they were dissatisfied with the price of products and services in Wuzhen was 21 (out of the total 234), or nearly 9%. Another 27 participants specifically stated that Wuzhen’s prices were reasonable and acceptable. The remainder of the people who left reviews about Wuzhen did not mention price; they might either have simply accepted the pricing even if they thought it was high, or they might have thought the price was reasonable, as the following examples indicate:

“Adding up all these fees might be quite a shock at first but after you enter the scenic area, you'll understand why and willing to pay for it. Worth to pay, I would say.” (*Level 3 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016, from George Town, Malaysia*)

“If you are adventurous, try out the local snacks being sold by the stalls. Some are sweet and some are savory, but for around 10 yuan per snack, it’s a good bargain!” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2012, from Manila*)

“If you look well you can buy nice clothing for a very fair price.” (*Level 5 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2012, 50–64-year-old man from Heythuysen*)

Most participants seemed to be satisfied with the prices of the products and services offered. Those who thought the price was reasonable and acceptable outnumbered those who thought the price was high. It was concluded that most of the participants were

satisfied with Wuzhen's pricing.

4.3.3.2 Businesses are Developing Well

Many of the 234 participants in this research mentioned the small shops selling souvenirs, tea, clothes, and matches. Based on the participants' descriptions, it was determined that the owners appreciated the business from tourists visiting Wuzhen. They served customers well because they have a passion for operating small stores in Wuzhen. The participants' reviews showed that small shop owners in Wuzhen are satisfied with their businesses and their lives. Participants who interacted with shop owners and were impressed by their service and attitude shared the following remarks.

“The owners are very friendly and helpful. They even picked us up at the bus station. The whole atmosphere in the west area is very good.” (*Level 5 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, woman from Germany*)

Only a few reviews indicate that participants were upset about not being treated well by shop owners. Therefore, it was concluded that the shop owners in Wuzhen are highly satisfied with the extra business that tourism brings and that they were happy at the time of the visit.

Hotels are another important part of the tourism business in Wuzhen. Among the 234 participants whose reviews were collected in this research, 48 participants discussed their hotel experiences. The majority claimed to be satisfied with the numerous hotel choices in Wuzhen. They found the experience of checking in and out to be convenient and the price to be reasonable. Few participants complained about the price, indicating that most participants were satisfied with the price of accommodations in Wuzhen. Most left positive evaluations of their hotel stay in Wuzhen, saying things like the room was clean, the bed was comfortable, and the transportation service from the hotel to various destinations was convenient. Some examples of positive reviews of hotels in Wuzhen left by participants follow:

“Hotels are very charming.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, 50–6-year-old 4 man from Hong Kong, China*)

“Our room in the guesthouse was very comfortable and clean.” (*Level 3 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, 65+-year-old man from Brisbane Australia*)

“We stayed in the west zone at a very nice hotel by the lake (see Figure 15).” (*Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009*)



Figure 15. Photo from the “very nice hotel by the lake” taken by a participant

“Rooms are good, clean. Restaurant serves a wide variety of fruits and salads along with authentic Chinese delicacies.” (*Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016, man from New Delhi, India*).

Because Wuzhen offers such a wide range of hotel options, participants could select different hotels according to their needs and their preferred location, whether within the Wuzhen water town or further away, and near the river or not. Participants generally enjoyed their hotel experience, and these hotels then profited from the number of tourists paying for accommodation.

4.3.3.3 Summary of Economic Aspect

Economics is the third critical aspect of sustainability. As the above content

conveys, customers seem to be satisfied with the price of products and services in Wuzhen. This helps to ensure its attractiveness to tourists in the future. Tourists perceived an equal balance between values and price and said they would purchase more products and services in this destination. This viewpoint supports the way local businesses have been developed and therefore fits the condition of economic sustainability in addition to social and environmental sustainability.

4.4 Analysis of Stakeholders in Wuzhen

When reviewing the participants' comments, it was found that they mentioned various stakeholders. Stakeholder analysis was defined as a systematic way to analyze the sustainability of destinations, so this analysis focused on different stakeholders.

4.4.1 Local Residents

Many local residents offer different kinds of tourism services to Wuzhen's visitors. The tourism business is well developed in this destination. As mentioned above, there are many small shops in Wuzhen, some of which were opened by local residents.

Another crucial business opportunity is for local residents to offer hotel services to visitors. These residents' home generally have two floors, and the people who live there design one floor as hotel space. The hotel space is not usually large but is enough for one or two paying couples or several persons to live in at one time, as well as the local residents who make their homes in the same building, thus affording them another source of income. Participants' reviews show that those who chose to live in the local residents' houses enjoyed the experience. They noted that the attitude of the local residents was good and passionate; local residents offered guidance and actively helped the participants solve problems, purchase tickets, and so on. These value-added services increased the participants' enjoyment of their visit. The participants' evaluations showed that the local residents were satisfied with having more tourists visiting Wuzhen and

bringing them extra income from their business activities. Tourists were welcomed as they created economic benefits for themselves and the locality, as the following reviews about local residents who offered hotel services to participants demonstrated:

“Living in the local residents’ house is also one interesting experience. They welcome the contributors and sometimes they would ask us to eat with them. They would treat us with delicious local food. I like this experience.” (*Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2011, from Beijing*)

“The local residents who provide accommodation are good. They are helpful. They would tell us which places are the must-to-visit places. They also told us how to take the bus. The local residents like to help people and their suggestions are always good.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2015, from Hong Kong, China*)

The response of the participants regarding the local residents indicated that the tourism industry was developed well. Tourists bring economic benefits to the local residents. At the same time, the local residents were sincere and honest. As mentioned in section 4.3.1.2, opinions differed regarding the level of commercialization. This research found that local residents did not over-commercialize. They treated tourists as friends and helped them solve problems, making a good impression on participants. All of these reviews show that the local residents benefitted from the development of the tourism industry in Wuzhen and that the industry has been well developed to meet their economic targets.

4.4.2 Environment: Hygiene and Sanitation

Thirty-five participants discussed the environment in Wuzhen in terms of hygiene and sanitation. According to their descriptions, hygiene and sanitation in the streets and public places was good. The following reviews support this statement:

“In many other destinations in China, it is common to see the mass of garbage in

some areas. I have visited many destinations in China and I found this feature. However, when I visit Wuzhen, I found that its hygiene is maintained well. The workers have done their work effectively. In addition, the business owners have managed their garbage well. So, the environment is maintained well. I like such a management way.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009, from Guangzhou, China*)

“I am surprised that the streets and the roads in Wuzhen are very clean. It is comfortable when walking along these streets and roads. This has made the contributors not throw away garbage as well as the shop owners. The environment is satisfying.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014, man from Hong Kong, China*)

“A very good job in maintaining the cleanliness of the whole area of the town.” (*Level 5 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2008, 25–34-year-old woman from Ipoh, Malaysia*)

“What impressed me, apart from anything else, was the cleanliness. Not once piece of litter, as soon as a leaf fell from a tree, the gardeners would pick it up.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2011, 65+-year-old man from Perth, Australia*)

“Public toilets in the Watertown are clean and modern.” (*Level 6 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2004, from Hong Kong, China*)

The environment is a key factor of tourism destinations’ sustainability management. Based on participants’ reflections, it was found that Wuzhen’s environment is well maintained. When combined with participants’ experiences of the beautiful, natural views they saw in Wuzhen (section 4.3.2), it was concluded that tourism development in Wuzhen offers environmental benefits.



Figure 16. Photo of clean streets in Wuzhen taken by a participant

4.4.3 Tour Groups

Among the 234 participants, 13 participants mentioned tour groups, which are also classified as stakeholders in this analysis of destination sustainability. Many local tour groups operate in Wuzhen and foreign participants spoke negatively of these local groups. According to their descriptions, the local tour groups were loud and annoying, giving foreign participants a negative impression. Some participants joined tour groups and were not satisfied with the experience due to what they considered too-frequent shopping stops and slow travelling time. The following participants' reviews address this issue:

“My recommendation, don't go with a tour group to be pressured to stop at shops and buy stuff and waste time.” (*Level 5 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009, woman from New Zealand*)

“The site is of course filled with loud tour groups.” (*Level 4 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2014, man from Leawood, Kansas*)

“Avoid going with a local tour group. I got lazy after days of travelling in China and thus a joined the tour group. Though I probably missed out on the beauty of Wuzhen, the tour group reminded me why I had always avoided joining them on travels.” (*Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2008, 25–34-year-old woman from Singapore*)

The participants’ experiences indicate that local tour group guides did not arrange tours effectively. They brought participants to shop for products and slowed down the entire trip, which was not what the participants expected; they did not want to spend that much time shopping, as they were more interested in seeing the views and in learning more information about the attractions.

However, participants who chose to hire private guides to lead them in small numbers found the experience satisfying. Some participants mentioned that private guides introduced them to historical spots and interesting stores. The private guides were more experienced, and participants found their services very valuable, which was not the case with tour group guides. This indicates that the training that private guides receive is effective. They know how to serve the tourists/participants effectively and introduce them to valuable spots.

Therefore, participants were satisfied with private guides, but the tour groups’ trips were slow and focused on shopping, which was not what the participants wanted. The analysis of tour guides unearthed both positive and negative aspects. There is room for improvement with respect to the local tour groups and guides.

4.4.4 Staff

Participants said that the staff members in Wuzhen worked hard and played their roles effectively. As mentioned above, the environment in Wuzhen was maintained well and participants did not see much garbage there. Staff in Wuzhen maintain the environment well so that participants visit a clean place. Other staff also played their

roles satisfactorily. Some participants paid attention to such issues and mentioned the staff in their reviews about Wuzhen on TripAdvisor.

“As the tour comes to an end, you get to see the great supply chain at work. They collaborate across different groups and will swap passengers around buses to drop you at a location nearest to where you stay. They seem to be happy to work with each other.” *(Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2008, 25–34-year-old woman from Singapore)*

“Incredible place to be. The staff is so friendly, helpful and warm, they greet you each time they see you. They are always with smile. I can see their passion about their work. I believe, if I work in such a beautiful place, I would also be happy.” *(Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2016, man from New Delhi, India)*



Figure 17. Photo of a hotel offering good service, taken by a participant

The staff might be trained well or enjoy working in Wuzhen. Their attitude to

participants was positive and this gave participants a warm feeling. In the beginning of this chapter, the participants' satisfaction levels were measured and found to be generally high. In this current section, participants viewed the staff in Wuzhen to be happy. There was a link between the two groups' satisfaction. The satisfaction of staff resulted in the satisfaction of customers. Participants enjoyed the service provided by the staff, so their satisfaction levels increased.

4.4.5 Summary of Stakeholder Satisfaction

According to participants, local residents enjoyed living in Wuzhen and the positive economic impact resulting from the development of tourism there. They also appreciated that the environment is protected and that living conditions are hygienic. Because many staff live in Wuzhen and most are content working there, staff members serve customers effectively. Visitors and local people have a good relationship based on positive interactions between staff and tourists.

However, participants' reviews did reveal one negative aspect of stakeholder relations between tour groups and visitors. Tourists did not feel that tour guides provided satisfactory services. The government and tourism planners still need to do more to improve stakeholder relationships in this area.

4.5 Analysis of the Dissatisfied Participants

Just 3% of participants who reviewed their experience of Wuzhen on TripAdvisor gave a one- or two-star rating for their satisfaction levels. The analysis of this data indicates that the chief complaint related to crowded conditions. These people travelled to Wuzhen during holiday periods and experienced long wait times for things like food or entertainment.

Some of the dissatisfied participants were in tour groups and spent too long shopping in the stores with guides who did not give satisfying service. The outcome was

the dissatisfaction of participants.

“My recommendation, don't go with a tour group to be pressured to stop at shops and buy stuff and waste time.” (*Level 5 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2009, woman from New Zealand*)

“The guide will squeeze u along the narrow streets with a quick introduction highlight of the town. U basically spend more energy shuffling yourself through the crowds and keeping a lookout for the tour guide amongst the sea of flags carried by the different tour guides.” (*Level 2 contributor, TripAdvisor member since 2013, woman from America*)

From participants' reviews, it was found that many participants who travelled on their own rather than joining a tour group were more satisfied than those in tour groups were. Tour groups are one way that participants can be introduced to the local culture, history, buildings, and other knowledge. However, it was found that many local tour groups focused too much of participants' time on shopping. Participants seemed to like shopping in small stores as they walked through the streets. Many of the dissatisfied participants said they did not enjoy the time spent waiting in the stores and being coerced by the local tour guides to shop for products and services. The local tourism government and tour companies should address this issue. To promote long-term development, it should be resolved quickly.

This research offers suggestions for how Wuzhen can improve its destination quality by focusing on customers' dissatisfaction. When a certain number of participants are not satisfied with some aspects of a destination, these are generally considered features that this destination can improve upon. The analysis of the reviews of dissatisfied participants indicates that crowding during holidays and the local tour group guides are two aspects that Wuzhen's tour organizations and government might work to improve.

When reviewing the reviews of the highly satisfied participants who gave five stars

as their satisfaction level, it was found that these participants were satisfied with different kinds of factors, such as the naturally beautiful views, their hotel experiences, and the convenience of travelling in Wuzhen; various reasons were given to explain their high levels of satisfaction. The reasons given for participants' dissatisfaction, however, were reoccurring: the crowds and local tour groups. Therefore, these two aspects should be focused on and improved in Wuzhen's future development projects to bring about sustainable development.

CHAPTER 5

5. Discussion

In this chapter, the results derived from analyzing the reviews of participants who had discussed their experiences of visiting Wuzhen on TripAdvisor are examined, presented, and linked to existing literature. Recommendations for tourism development and future research are then outlined in the second section, followed by an acknowledgment of the research's limitations.

The aim of this research is to explore visitors' perceptions of various aspects of the ancient town of Wuzhen and to reflect on sustainability issues in this popular cultural tourism destination in China. The research question was addressed using both the triple bottom line and stakeholder analysis frameworks, and findings were linked to the sustainability framework (Travis, 2011). The sustainability theory used indicates that this destination's sustainable development was predicated on balancing three types of benefits: socio-cultural, economic, and environmental (Torres-Delgado & Saarinen, 2014). Since these are key elements of the development and sustainability of this popular tourist site, the researcher borrowed from the customer knowledge framework to analyze travellers' reviews. Perceptions of these three benefits were deduced from the travellers' experiences to evaluate Wuzhen's sustainability. The following sections discuss the study findings within the framework of the theories discussed in the literature review.

5.1 Socio-cultural Sustainability

If a destination's development is intended to promote socio-cultural sustainability, local government should ensure that local residents and communities would benefit from the development (Lang, 2012). Tourism organizations and the locality's government should offer training to employees to facilitate both employee and customer satisfaction. In this research, participants reported that local residents had a positive attitude towards

the destination's tourism development. Numerous participants expressed that local residents welcomed their presence, and that this positive attitude made their interaction with local residents a pleasant experience. Lang (2012) notes that local residents generally welcome visitors when they positively affect the local economy's finances. Jeon et al. (2016) also agrees that local residents' state of mind and emotional well-being affects a destination's level of sustainable development. According to visitors to Wuzhen, local residents have peaceful and enjoyable lives. The satisfaction levels reported by participants indicate that local residents treat visitors welcomingly.

However, overcrowding was an issue mentioned by many participants. It is possible that the tourism development process undertaken in 2014 resulted in attracting a high enough volume of visitors to affect the lives of local residents negatively. One weakness of this study is that it did not directly investigate the local residents' viewpoints. In the future, it would be beneficial to collect responses directly from local residents in relation to the impact the current tourism economy has on their lives and whether their lives will be impacted by development in the future.

From the reviews of participants, it is found that participants are highly satisfied with the services provided by the staff of Wuzhen's shops. Participants reported enjoying positive interactions with the businesses' service employees.

The preservation and presentation of local culture in ancient towns was another important socio-cultural benefit. The Austrian National Tourist Office (2012) recommends that cultural tourism developers consider how to present cultural heritage in a way that attracts visitors without significantly distorting that heritage. Yu (2008) argues that experiential cultural tourism in ancient towns should focus more on traditional culture than modernization and stressed the importance of preserving cultural heritage. In this study, the participants' positive evaluations of the preservation of local culture demonstrated that Wuzhen has achieved this. This research shows that only a small proportion of participants thought the old buildings were not preserved well and that

most considered the old buildings in Wuzhen to be both well preserved and authentic. The many small museums in Wuzhen also offered participants cultural and historical lessons they valued. Long after participants left Wuzhen, they remembered those small museums and the experience of walking along streets lined with authentic old buildings. They were impressed by the history and cultural experiences that Wuzhen offered, and those experiences constitute the socio-cultural benefits created for participants.

To sum up, the socio-cultural sustainability of cultural ancient towns involves two features, and Wuzhen offers both. Visitors thought that this destination created significant socio-cultural benefits for local residents, small businesses, and visitors. The analysis also reveals future research direction, such as exploring local residents' perceptions about tourism development in Wuzhen, Wuzhen employees' training and development, and the local government's preservation practices. Including more stakeholders' viewpoints and practices would help complete the socio-cultural analysis.

There is one other interesting finding related to the socio-cultural perspective. The data analysis process demonstrated that the majority of participants who complained about overcrowding were non-Chinese people and that only a small proportion of Chinese participants mentioned this issue. Dai (2012) argued that visitors' perception of tourism issues differed across cultures. This suggests that Chinese and non-Chinese people have different evaluation standards regarding crowding. This distinction reflects the importance of incorporating cultural differences about visitors' perceptions of tourism in any future research. The theory of customer satisfaction highlights the importance of comparing perceived quality and expected quality. Chinese and non-Chinese people may well have different expectations about the number of visitors in an area. Researchers can explore this issue in future.

This research showed that the number of tourists visiting Wuzhen on weekends and holidays might well have been close to the saturation level. Participants who visit Wuzhen at these times may become dissatisfied with the service and with their overall

experience; local government should enact appropriate measures to ensure that the environment is not damaged during these busy periods. This social issue should be continuously observed and controlled.

5.2 Economic Sustainability

The cost and the inherent value of the products and services Wuzhen offers supports the economic sustainability of this ancient town. Theoretically, economic sustainability requires that there be sufficient market demand for tourism products and that these products should meet the requirements of potential participants (Austrian National Contributor Office, 2012). When economic benefits are created, local businesses can operate their businesses effectively and efficiently, and money can be continuously reinvested into business activities that improve tourism products and support the quality of life of local tourism operators and communities (Travis, 2011).

This research delineated how participants described numerous economic activities they participated in in the ancient town of Wuzhen. Many visitors purchased tickets to local entertainment services and activities offered in Wuzhen, such as taking a boat to see the nightscape or learning to make traditional crafts in a small manual workshop. Having such options available increases the level of visitor involvement. Scholars such as Smith (2005), and Yan and Hu (2015) determine that visitor involvement results in memorable experiences that can engender deep, strong emotions about the destination for visitors. This value extends beyond financial. Studies show that cultural destinations can offer various economic activities to attract participants' attention (Torre & Scarborough, 2016; Rodrigo, 2002). Motivating visitors to get involved in local activities has a significant impact. This viewpoint is supported by the participants' reviews that were reproduced in this study.

Tourists often search for information related to their destination before they visit (Gou & Zhou, 2015), and many of this study's participants talked about the boat

activities and entertainment activities, recommending that others should enjoy these activities if they visit Wuzhen. Having many participants claim they enjoyed Wuzhen's entertainment activities on tourism websites like TripAdvisor motivates more tourists to participate in them. For instance, because tourists recommended a visit to the blue print dye house on TripAdvisor or other tourism websites, other tourists might plan to visit that place once they read those reviews, thus attracting more and more tourists and increasing the likelihood of Wuzhen's long-term development. This process is an important aspect of economic sustainability.

In terms of the cost of tickets and services in Wuzhen, more customers believed that the prices were reasonable than did those who thought them too expensive. Most of the participants were willing to spend money on numerous activities in Wuzhen and noted that they found the whole experience a satisfying one. Most enjoyed the boat rides and the shopping in Wuzhen. Gou and Zhou (2015) state that effective tourism activities can attract visitors, which then attracts further investment to increase the number and quality of the facilities and services available, thereby increasing economic growth. If tourism activities generate income for local businesses, they are generally more willing to serve participants well to attract even more income. In this research, based on the analysis of participants' reviews, it is reasonable to assume that owners can increase economic benefits if they deliver effective entertainment options in which visitors can participate. Travis (2011) states that increasing customers' likelihood of purchasing again is an important feature of sustainable economic activity. The participants' reviews indicate that many visitors suggest entertainment services to other visitors. Such reviews influence more visitors to try the economic activities in Wuzhen. It is reasonable to predict that Wuzhen is still in a positive economic growth process. This is one reflection of economic sustainability.

5.3 Environmental Sustainability

Environment is another important aspect of sustainability. This research concludes that Wuzhen's environment was clean and beautiful. Many participants noted that Wuzhen differs from other ancient and cultural destinations in China in that this destination met or exceeded visitors' expectations with respect to cleanliness and hygiene. Participants also found the natural views to be beautiful. Two factors are involved in that finding. First, Wuzhen has a naturally beautiful view. Secondly, the local government has maintained the local environmental system effectively to highlight Wuzhen's natural beauty. However, there is not enough current data to assess Wuzhen's environmental system effectively. Cleanness/hygiene is just one aspect of environmental sustainability.

Wu (2013) states that environmental sustainability requires tourism resources to be well-protected, as business and human activities can unbalance ecological systems. The development of tourism activities should be based on protecting natural resources and the environment (Roe et al., 2014). A point that should be noted here is that TripAdvisor participants' reviews of Wuzhen did not seem to pay much attention to environmental sustainability and the protection of natural resources—they concentrated on food, hotels, shops, and entertainment. However, this does not mean that Wuzhen should ignore environment sustainability. As Tse and Zhang (2013) found, factors contributing to visitors' satisfaction or dissatisfaction differs. In this study, participants were satisfied with Wuzhen's natural environment, but if Wuzhen does not continue to protect the natural environment, customers might well become dissatisfied, as Tse and Zhang (2013) caution.

Participants indicated that Wuzhen's overcrowding on holidays and weekends was problematic. Wu (2013) notes that environmental sustainability requires local tourism organizations and governments to consider the environmental capacity of scenic spots and the carrying capacity of resources. If the number of tourists exceeds a destination's

capacity, the environment will be damaged and significant environmental pollution will occur. In other words, overcrowding causes both social and environmental problems. The findings of this study do not suggest that this is already a problem, but that there is a risk. Based on the participants' reflections of crowding during peak tourism seasons, the government and tour organizations in Wuzhen are advised to do some careful capability planning and control in the future.

5.4 Experiential Cultural Tourism in Ancient Towns

Wuzhen, as a representative of ancient towns in China, is unlike modern destinations and it thereby offers participants different experiences. The literature review included many studies of ancient towns, as these destinations offer tourists experiential cultural tourism products and services. Therefore, the sustainable development of these destinations is related to the effectiveness with which these destinations can satisfy tourists who seek such experiences when they travel. The analysis of the participants' satisfaction levels identified that the majority were satisfied, indicating that experiential cultural tourism products and services have been designed effectively in Wuzhen. A careful study of the TripAdvisor participants' experiences revealed many positive aspects about Wuzhen. The following segment uses theories about experiential cultural tourism to examine the findings gathered from the participants who visited Wuzhen.

Cultural tourism attempts to give tourists a special, culture-related experience (Raj et al., 2013). Culture was previously defined as the totality of physical and intellectual products that human beings created throughout history, as it is expressed through language, literature, art, buildings, food, clothes and many other forms (Tomaselli, 2012). The TripAdvisor participants examined in this research indicated that they learned a great deal about Wuzhen's history from its museums and about its culture from the old buildings and streets. They also perceived the influence of culture on local residents' lifestyles. These cultural tourism experiences were distinctly different from

their own cultural norms.

Cultural tourism resources tend to be unique (Ivanovic, 2008). In this research, cultural experiences like the water views and the lifestyles of local residents made a lasting impression on participants and were a large part of the reason that participants enjoyed visiting Wuzhen. They appreciated being able to see and experience something different from what they were accustomed to in their hometowns. Gan and Ma (2000) state that participation is an important aspect of cultural tourism, and the participants' reviews used in this research indicate that visitors were actively engaged in tourism activities. For instance, participants travelled by boat on the rivers of Wuzhen and purchased tickets to see the local museums, both of which demonstrate customers' engagement with local cultural activities. Participants were satisfied because they enjoyed the culturally related experiential process that differed from their usual daily lives.

Liu (2011) argues that cultural tourism in modern times is changing. The previous cultural tourism model gave participants a hurried and cursory glance at the scenic spots. This traditional model no longer meets the psychological needs of modern tourists, and it has become necessary to engage customers in the cultural life of local people and encourage them to participate in local activities.

This research found that tourists who joined tour groups were not satisfied, as the tour group activities were consistent with the old tourism model, whereas participants who arranged their own sightseeing trips were more satisfied. As the new tourism model suggests, they engaged in local activities, lived in the houses of local residents, took the time needed to enjoy their trips, and interacted widely with the people who live there. These participants were thus quite satisfied with their trip to Wuzhen, and their reviews imply that the old model no longer meets the needs of customers. Wuzhen should move toward more applications of the new tourism model to continue to create benefits and increase income from tourists. When local tour organizations arrange tours, they should

incorporate more opportunities for interaction and engagement to allow participants to enjoy the local cultural life and activities rather than relying so heavily on shopping.

More and more participants seek a modern form of experiential cultural tourism in ancient towns; they want to see cultural views and experience cultural life (Liu, 2011). Wuzhen met both of these needs, and it has become one of the most popular ancient towns in China. Li and Sun (2009) similarly found that many ancient towns in China have evolved into experiential cultural tourism destinations.

The literature review delineated different attitudes regarding convenience and cultural preservation in ancient towns. These differing viewpoints are presented by You (2013), Yu (2008), and Wu and Zhang (2003). You (2013) supports the development of modern facilities; Yu (2008) argues that experiential cultural tourism in ancient towns should focus more on traditional culture rather than modernization, while Wu and Zhang (2003) support the addition of new elements to ancient towns that mix cultural heritage with modernization. This research demonstrates that Wuzhen has integrated Wu and Zhang's (2003) suggestions. Wuzhen's many modern facilities satisfied participants; in particular, its many small museums and its preservation of old buildings meets tourists' cultural needs and introduces China's history and culture to participants. It was found that Wuzhen effectively balances modern facilities with cultural heritage.

Arguments made about the authenticity of cultural ancient towns also differ. It is widely agreed that authenticity has become an important aspect used to evaluate the quality of cultural ancient towns (Li & Zhang, 2007). Yu (2008) states that international participants travel a long way to experience cultural tourism and expect to see "real" customs, traditions, and rituals in ancient towns. However, some ancient towns in China have become over-commercialized and have lost some degree of authenticity (Lv & Huang, 2012). This research found that TripAdvisor participants believe Wuzhen still offers a high level of authenticity. Although a small proportion claimed that Wuzhen was over-commercialized, most appreciated the way the local government had maintained

the old, historical buildings of Wuzhen and the way local residents happily demonstrated their traditional lifestyles. Participants could see Wuzhen's traditional culture and historic elements, and the town's authenticity constituted one foundation of its sustainable development.

A tourism destination's sustainable development is based on attracting a continuous stream of new tourists. Since many international tourists are interested in a destination's authenticity, the authenticity of Wuzhen will influence its sustainable development. Many of the participants recommended others to visit Wuzhen. This indicates that authenticity currently affects Wuzhen's sustainable development positively.

5.5 Sustainability Issues of Wuzhen

The preservation of conveyors of folk culture such as traditional and historical buildings is important in ancient towns (Ding, 2009), but cultural tourism destinations must also provide convenient facilities to ensure that tourists enjoy their visits. Participants' reviews confirmed that Wuzhen has balanced these sometimes-conflicting needs, unlike the development of other ancient towns in China that experience many problems in this regard. For instance, the cultural atmosphere of some Chinese ancient towns has disintegrated, and have lost their previous charm (Liu, 2011). Other ancient towns in China have abundant historical and cultural deposits, but have difficulty integrating modern conveniences (Gong & Deng, 2011). Some tourism organizations and governments in those ancient towns seek quick success and instant benefits and consequently damage the traditional scenes of ancient towns (Liu, 2011). Ancient towns that experienced problems such as these could learn from Wuzhen's example, where the historical and cultural buildings are well preserved and visitors' comfort is ensured. Maintaining such a balance is difficult, but important.

Although some scholars disagree about the difficulties of balancing development and historical conservation in ancient towns, solutions were found in Wuzhen to

maintain an appropriate balance. One such solution is to make good use of customer knowledge. For instance, in this research, the analysis of participants' reviews identified some issues. Wuzhen's sustainable development has been done well, but there are still ways to improve. For example, Wuzhen could better integrate the following two aspects of sustainable development.

First, crowding on weekends and holidays is a serious matter. Many participants noted their dissatisfaction with the crowds. During these periods, stores could not meet the needs of all the customers, and customers were kept waiting for a long time. When there were crowds, the streets became dirty and some customers complained about cleanliness. If Wuzhen does not solve this problem, more and more participants will complain about this issue online, which will negatively influence Wuzhen's reputation among potential visitors. Wuzhen might consider enacting ways to control the flow of visitors and offer more services and products to customers to cut their waiting time or, at least, make the process more enjoyable.

The second issue is the tour groups, which did not meet the needs of modern travellers. The local tour guides are still following the old model rather than the new ones associated with cultural tourism. As mentioned above, modern participants demand cultural experiences and would like to learn about culture and history. If the local tour guides continue to guide the groups toward shopping rather than educating the participants, they will not meet their needs and this, too, will generate negative reviews online. As is the case with the crowding issue, failure to address this issue could cause more problems and might reduce Wuzhen's economic benefits. Other ancient towns should also investigate customer satisfaction and then design responsive practices and management tactics to create socio-cultural, economic, and environmental benefits.

Another part of the framework used to analyze sustainability was stakeholder analysis; if the ancient town development results in benefits for many stakeholders, the town can be considered sustainable (Dogl & Behnam, 2015). In this study, participants

mentioned several stakeholders: local businesses, local residents, local tour guides, and employees. Participants reported that these stakeholders seemed to be happy living and working in Wuzhen and that they perceived positive relationships among most of the stakeholders in Wuzhen. It is important to highlight that these positive relationships are only the visitors' observation. Critically speaking, because other stakeholders' viewpoints and feelings are not directly investigated in this study, the actual relationships and interactions among various stakeholders in Wuzhen is relatively unknown. If stakeholders in Wuzhen were interviewed and their perceptions analyzed, the stakeholder theory could be applied more comprehensively to discuss Wuzhen's degree of sustainability.

The participants' reviews indicate that Wuzhen is currently viewed as a good place to travel. Visitors willingly recommend that their friends and other visitors should visit there. They think Wuzhen is a worthwhile travel destination, one with many interesting paid activities to enjoy, and they perceive good relationships among stakeholders such as local residents and service employees. Further perspectives of these stakeholders are still needed.

Wuzhen is likely to become a model of development from which other ancient towns in China can learn. However, Wuzhen's development as a cultural destination can be improved by increasing its capacity to accommodate the increased number of tourists who visit on weekends and holidays and by changing the tour group model. Both initiatives would help Wuzhen better meet participants' cultural needs.

5.6 Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

The aim of this research was to explore TripAdvisor participants' perceptions of various aspects of the ancient town of Wuzhen and reflect upon sustainability issues in cultural tourism destinations in China. The research's three objectives were met by analyzing and discussing the reviews of participants written on TripAdvisor. It was first

identified that most of the participants in Wuzhen were satisfied with this cultural ancient town. Although a small proportion of participants complained about the crowds on weekends and holidays, most were satisfied with many of the products and services Wuzhen offered. Nine positive aspects that participants enjoyed were identified: the design and implementation of Wuzhen's development, the overall experience, beautiful views, authentic local atmosphere, comfortable hotels, good experiential activities, small museum experiences, reasonable prices, and comprehensive facilities. Embedding these aspects into the sustainability framework indicated that Wuzhen's development created socio-cultural, economic, and environmental benefits. Participants thought Wuzhen performed well with respect to these nine aspects and recommended that other visitors should travel there. This is a good signifier of sustainable development, indicating that this destination will continuously attract more and more visitors.

Sustainable development is a complex issue. This study's findings were based only on the visitors' perspectives. One finding demonstrated that Chinese and non-Chinese participants evaluated crowding standards differently, and that discovery highlights how visitors' perceptions of Wuzhen's sustainability might also differ depending on where they are from.

Authenticity is an important feature of ancient towns, but developing comprehensive facilities to support modern participants' needs is also necessary. Visitors, largely, thought Wuzhen met both of these conditions; it preserves its old buildings well, and provides comprehensive modern facilities to ensure participants' convenience. Wuzhen seems to achieve a balance between authenticity and modernization in the eyes of most visitors, though arguments about modernization and authenticity are ongoing. In the analysis of economic sustainability, it was found that visitors enjoyed the improvement of modern facilities but, by definition, improving facilities tends to reduce cultural facilities. It is difficult to balance modernization with preservation to meet all visitors' needs.

Most visitors also perceived that Wuzhen's stakeholders enjoyed their lives and operating their businesses. They were as satisfied as the participants were; indeed, this stakeholder satisfaction is linked to the participants' satisfaction. Because they were satisfied, they served customers effectively and customers then enjoyed the services and tours, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of sustainable development.

This research identified two issues that would help Wuzhen develop its tourism industry more effectively and sustainably. The first is overcrowding on weekends and holidays, when many participants became dissatisfied. Wuzhen should increase its service capacity to reduce customers' waiting time. Secondly, the relative government department or organizations should train local group tour guides to update their tour design. The traditional model does not meet the needs modern tourists have for a cultural experience; their major need was not to shop in the shops in ancient towns but, rather, to see the cultural views and historical buildings and experience the cultural life of the town. Local tour guides should offer that type of service to increase tourists' satisfaction levels. TripAdvisor participants would then share additional positive reviews online, and the destination would attract more visitors.

5.7 Recommendations

Many ancient towns in China have not executed tourism development well. This case study of Wuzhen offers the following critical suggestions to ancient towns.

It is suggested that ancient towns preserve historical and cultural buildings and elements carefully because authenticity is an important factor influencing visitor satisfaction. These elements are also the destinations' most priceless resources. In the process of preserving local buildings and elements, ancient towns should increase transportation options and other supportive facilities. The tourism industry's target customers are modern visitors who expect a comfortable trip and convenient service, and modern facilities directly affect visitor satisfaction.

Ancient towns should also consider how to balance socio-cultural, economic, and environmental benefits. The balance is not easy to achieve, but if tourism organizations keep this balance in mind, they will be better equipped to consider many aspects and set requirements before taking action in ancient towns. For instance, they should ensure that the price of services and products is reasonable. They should train staff to incorporate service awareness and to treat participants politely and passionately. They also need to enhance transportation options so that transportation is convenient. There is still a lot to do. Ancient town tourism destinations must balance many aspects to achieve sustainable development.

5.8 Limitations and Future Research

In this research, the analysis of the stakeholders was based on TripAdvisor participants' reviews, but participants' perceptions might differ to those of the stakeholders. A more comprehensive solution would be to collect data directly from stakeholders such as staff members, small businesses owners, local residents, and tour guides. Future primary research might more effectively explore stakeholders' satisfaction levels regarding tourism development in Wuzhen.

The second limitation was related to the research method. This research collected reviews from only one internet platform, and only reviews in English and Chinese were examined. Future studies should incorporate a larger sample size — rather than use just one data source —including reviews in more than the two aforementioned languages. A larger sample size would provide more reliable, insightful results regarding visitors' experiences at Wuzhen. Furthermore, future research may gather information from visitors who do not post reviews on social media sites. This could involve other data collection methodologies such as interviews or surveys.

This study analyzed Wuzhen's authenticity from the visitors' perspectives rather than from that of third-party organizations. Future researchers might analyze the topic

from third-party organizations' viewpoints. Although this study has some limitations, it provides some valuable direction for future research. Researchers building on this study will be able to examine sustainability from more stakeholders' perspectives.

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