



Factors Affecting Chinese Tourists' Pro-Environmental Intention to Stay at Eco-Friendly Hotels in Thailand

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the intentions of Chinese tourists that are related to staying at eco-friendly hotels in Thailand by employing a model combining the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Value-Belief-Norm Theory. In order to investigate the factors that influence the intention of Chinese hotel guests to stay in green hotels, a quantitative research approach was applied for this study with a questionnaire on the eco-friendly and conventional hotels in Bangkok, Nakhon Nayok and Phuket completed by a sample of 436 Chinese hotel guests. The results indicate that their sense of obligation to take pro-environmentally friendly actions, attitude towards behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control have a significant influence on the intention of Chinese guests to stay in eco-friendly hotels while traveling in Thailand. With the use of pro-social and self-interest variables, the proposed model indicates a high level of prediction to the behavioral intention ($R^2 = 0.455$). Recommendations are provided for government institutions in both countries to introduce educational programs to strengthen the environmental awareness of tourists from China and to facilitate the implementation and conducting of hotel operations that are based on the requirements of environmentally aware travelers by hotel managers at eco-friendly hotels in Thailand.

Introduction

Due to its strong economic growth during recent decades, China is currently among the most important economies in the world. Recently, China's National Bureau of Statistics reported that the total Gross Domestic Product was 13,608.15 billion USD in 2018. The economy of China has now entered a completely new era in which the structure of social consumption is starting to emphasize the development and enjoyment of individuals. One of the largest consumer sectors in Chi-

na will certainly be tourism. International travel is no longer limited to the elite, as it was previously, but is presently a popular choice for consumers that is available to a rapidly growing urban middle class. Based on a report issued by the China Tourism Academy in 2017, the number of Chinese traveling abroad totaled 130 million, a rise of 7% from the previous year (China Tourism Academy, 2018).

Being a well-known destination for global tourism, Thailand is considered to be the most favorite

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country for tourists from China. In recent years, Thailand has experienced the rapid growth of visitors arriving from Mainland China. Thailand's Ministry of Tourism and Sports has reported that the arrivals for the year 2019 (from January to November) from Mainland China reached 10.14 million, and thus, China has been the source of the highest number of international tourists for Thailand for over seven years in a row. The total number of arrivals in 2019 showed a 4.61% increase from 2018. In 2019, visitor arrivals from Mainland China accounted for 28.3% of the total number of 35,866,606 inbound tourists (Ministry of Tourism & Sports, 2019). As a result, Mainland China is currently Thailand's most important market in terms of international tourists. In addition, the total expenditures of Chinese tourists recorded at 505,994.96 million baht, which represents a 6.16% increase from 2018, which amounted to 476,655.15 million baht. In terms of the total number of travelers and their spending habits, China is considered as the top country in Thailand's inbound tourism.

Due to being one of the most popular destinations for tourism in the world, the tourism industry is a significant source of foreign exchange and a major provider of jobs for Thailand. The tourism resources of the country are especially rich, and the weather is sunny throughout the year. There are also plentiful nature resources; however, there are also major environmental issues that have resulted in Thailand being ranked much lower than other countries. For example, in 2017, the World Economic Forum's Travel & Competitiveness Report listed Thailand at 93rd place for enforcement of environmental regulations, 100th place for the stringency of the environmental regulations, and 122nd place for environmental sustainability. With regard to the tourism industry, the hotel sector is among the most significant consumers of natural resources due to their use of large amounts of energy and resources consumed in terms of electricity, water and disposable items in their everyday operations. This leads to a number of negative impacts on the natural environment (Verma & Chandra, 2018; Bohdanowicz, 2005). With the aim of reducing the environmental damage, numerous hotels have begun adopting green policies and introducing programs focused on the environment into their operations, which allows them to become green hotels (Cerutti, Beccaro, Bruun, Donno, Bonvegna, & Bounous, 2016; Yadav & Pathak, 2016).

In general, Chinese citizens believe that the responsibility to protect the environment belongs to the

government, rather than themselves (Harris, 2006), as the nation is led by a single-party system, and the people do not have much input with regard to environmental issues (Foster, 2001). Nevertheless, much more attention toward environmental concerns has been seen among the public in recent years as environmental reporting is now playing a major role in the Chinese media (Hilton, 2013). In addition to the citizens, the government has also begun to take action regarding the environment and sustainable development, and it is perceived to be a high-level priority in China. Thus, the government has provided a guide for Chinese tourists traveling internationally and requested that they behave in an appropriate manner by paying attention to proper etiquette and hygiene, respect the local environment during outbound tourism, and adhere to other behaviors that are also considered as contributing to sustainability.

Because of the increased emphasis placed on environmental issues, a growing number of research has been conducted this topic. Based on the survey of the previous research, the majority of the research studies done on environmentally-aware behavior have been carried out in western countries, including Germany (Bamberg, 2003), the USA (Han, 2015; Choi, Jang, & Kandampully, 2015; Van, Riper, & Kyle, 2014) and Australia (Nimri, Patiar, Kensbock, & Jin, 2020). In mainland China, several research has focused on the pro-environmental behavior of Chinese travelers, especially with regard to sustainable tourism (Gao, Huang, & Zhang, 2017), sustainable transportation behavior (Liu, Sheng, Mundorf, Redding, & Ye, 2017), and their decisions to patronize eco-friendly hotels (Wang, Wang, Wang, Li, & Zhao 2018). Several research conducted in Taiwan have investigated the intention of Taiwanese hotel guests regarding green hotels in Taiwan (Chen & Peng, 2014; Lee & Jan, 2018). However, there is limited research studies that investigate the pro-environmental intentions of outbound Chinese tourists traveling in Thailand, the country that they visit the most.

Objective

Due to the apparent importance of gaining a better understanding of Chinese tourists' pro-environmental behavior while traveling abroad, this study's main objective was to identify the factors that influence the intention of consumers to choose green accommodation in Thailand. The literature on the pro-environmental intentions of Chinese outbound tourists will be enriched by the findings of this study.

Conceptual framework

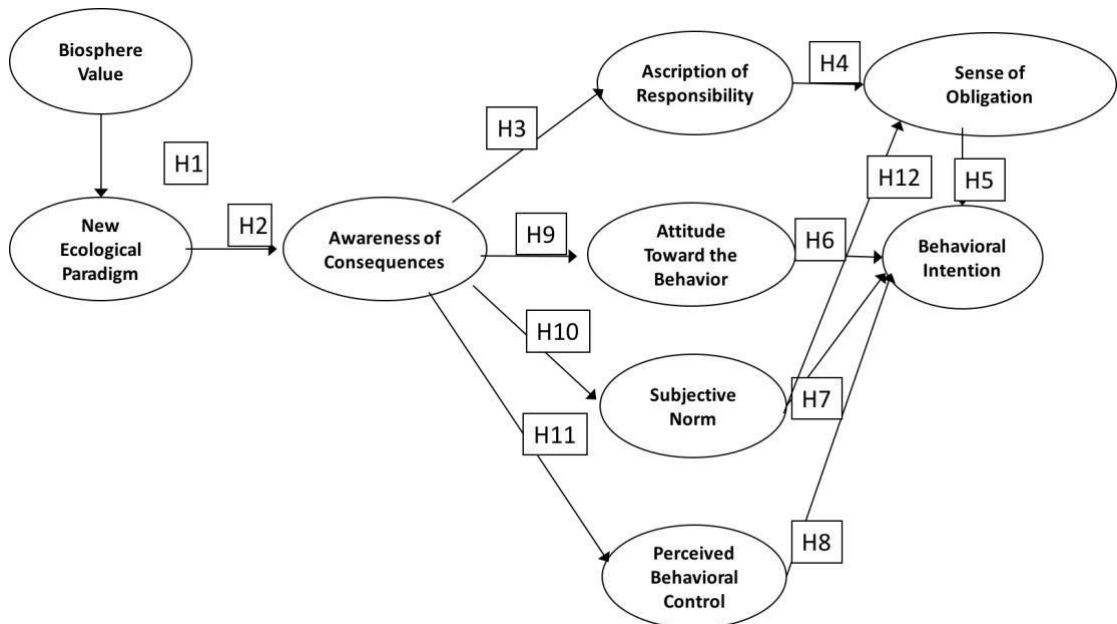


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Research methodology

All the measurement items used in the study were adopted from previous research such as sustainable travel model (Bamberg, 2003), pro-environmental intention/behavior (Bamberg & Möser, 2007), eco-friendly hotels (Kim & Han, 2010) and sustainable tourism (Gao, Huang, & Zhang, 2017). The validity of these instruments has been repeatedly demonstrated in these studies. The questionnaire in this study was initially developed in English and then translated into Chinese. The translated Chinese version was reviewed by three researchers with competencies in both Chinese and English.

1. Data collection

The target respondents for this research comprised of Chinese tourists who travel to Thailand and are aware of eco-friendly hotels. Before the researcher conduct the main study, a pilot study was conducted in December 2018, a sample group of 64 participants who were Chinese tourists at one eco-friendly hotel in Nakhon Nayok Province. The pilot test was completed in four days, and generated the Cronbach's alpha scores for each variable, which all showed a Cronbach's alpha score that was higher than 0.7, thus indicating the acceptable reliability standards (George & Mallery, 2003).

During the data collection process, the researcher contacted different eco-friendly hotels in Bangkok,

Chiang Mai, Krabi, Nakhon Nayok, Phuket and Samui to request their permission for data collection. In response, the hotels from Chiang Mai, Krabi, Samui, stated that they had only few or no bookings from Chinese guests because their target customers were not Chinese guests. The distribution of the final survey was conducted by field survey from April to June 2019 at hotels in Bangkok, Nakhon Nayok and Phuket. From field survey, the researcher can observe the immediate feedback from respondents and to ensure the accuracy of the data collected. A convenience sampling was used for the data collection, and the target respondents fully cooperated and the accessibility of the respondents was easily achieved. Two screening questions was asked to ensure the respondents were frequent traveler and were aware of eco-friendly hotels. Only the qualified respondents were asked to answer the survey. As a result, a total of 436 usable responses were collected from Chinese tourists who meet the requirements.

2. Sample profile

Among the survey respondents, the number of male participants was 220 and there were 216 female participants. For the age range, the largest proportion of the participants were found to be in the range of 41 to 50 years (187 participants at 42.9%). In respect to the level of education, the largest portion of the participants hold

an undergraduate degree (236 respondents at 54.1%), which suggests that the Chinese citizens with a high level of education (undergraduate level) comprise the largest group of tourists as displayed in Table 1.

3. Tools for analysis

For data analysis, use of the software package SPSS 23.0 and AMOS 21.0 was chosen. Two-step approach of SEM was employed for data analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). First, testing for reliability, discriminant validity and convergent validity of the constructs employed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). After the measurement for the competence of the model, the second step is to find the best-fitting model, testing the associations between constructs and the hypotheses were tested by using structural equation modelling.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Testing of the path coefficients among the constructs was performed with a path analysis by using the AMOS 21.0 software package. Determination of the fit of the structural model employed the major criteria of χ^2/df , NFI, RFI, IFI, TLI, CFI, and RMSEA of the structural equation model for the intention to stay in environmentally friendly accommodations, which was proposed for the conceptual framework. The chi-square goodness-of-fit was indicated to be $\chi^2 = 8.901$, $df = 6$, $\chi^2/df = 1.484$. Furthermore, the baseline comparison fit indices showed an acceptable fit of the hypothesized model NFI = 0.995; RFI = 0.972; IFI = 0.998; TLI = 0.991; CFI = 0.998 the acceptability of the proposed relationship for each of the constructs was confirmed. Moreover, the path model's good fit was reported by the RMSEA, which was equal to 0.033.

A composite-reliability test was performed to evaluate the internal consistency of the multi-item measures for each construct, it is indicated by the results displayed in Table 2 that the values of composite-reliability were found to be in a range higher than 0.7 from 0.794 to 0.897 for the nine constructs, which denoted an adequate convergence or internal consistency. Additionally, with the CFA, the average percentage of variance extracted (AVE) is regarded as a summary indicator of convergence, the calculation of which is defined as the number of items divided into the sum of the squared standardized factor loadings. In general, an AVE of 0.5 or higher indicates a suitable convergent validity (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 1998).

Table 2 illustrates that the range of the AVE was 0.568 to 0.686 for the nine constructs, which indicates that all of the constructs provided evidence of convergent validity.

Table 1 Correlation matrix and square root of AVE

| | BV | EW | AC | AR | ATB | SN | PBC | SO | BI |
|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| BV | 0.790 | | | | | | | | |
| EW | 0.738 | 0.828 | | | | | | | |
| AC | 0.504 | 0.534 | 0.773 | | | | | | |
| AR | 0.438 | 0.548 | 0.705 | 0.772 | | | | | |
| ATB | 0.484 | 0.591 | 0.658 | 0.722 | 0.803 | | | | |
| SN | 0.469 | 0.532 | 0.622 | 0.697 | 0.655 | 0.768 | | | |
| PBC | 0.423 | 0.497 | 0.626 | 0.661 | 0.682 | 0.687 | 0.754 | | |
| SO | 0.371 | 0.463 | 0.585 | 0.679 | 0.647 | 0.717 | 0.691 | 0.766 | |
| BI | 0.416 | 0.506 | 0.555 | 0.659 | 0.64 | 0.745 | 0.711 | 0.721 | 0.783 |

Remark: BV=Biosphere Value; EW=Ecological Worldview; AC=Awareness of Consequences; AR=Ascription of Responsibility; ATB=Attitude Toward the Behavior; SN=Social Norm; PBC=Perceived Behavioral Control; SO=Sense of Obligation; BI=Behavioral Intention

Table 2 Reliability test and convergent validity

| Construct | Composite reliability | Average variance extracted |
|------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| BV | 0.868 | 0.624 |
| EW | 0.897 | 0.686 |
| AC | 0.855 | 0.598 |
| AR | 0.816 | 0.597 |
| ATB | 0.879 | 0.645 |
| SN | 0.851 | 0.589 |
| PBC | 0.794 | 0.568 |
| SO | 0.804 | 0.588 |
| BI | 0.824 | 0.613 |

Remark: BV=Biosphere Value; EW=Ecological Worldview; AC=Awareness of Consequences; AR=Ascription of Responsibility; ATB=Attitude Toward the Behavior; SN=Social Norm; PBC=Perceived Behavioral Control; SO=Sense of Obligation; BI=Behavioral Intention

As explained above, all of the fit indices at the CFA stage of each construct were found to be satisfactory, which indicated that each set of the measurement models is able to effectively illustrate their latent constructs. Consequently, all indices of NFI, IFI, TLI, NFI, and CFI marginally fit the value close to 0.9, and the measurement model showed that the construct or composite reliability, the construct validity, the convergent validity, and the discriminant validity were supported by the factorial structure of pro-environmental behavior. A suitable confidence level was shown in all measurement models for the CFA process with regard to the way in which the latent variables, Biospheric Values, Ecological Worldview, Awareness of Consequences, Ascription of Responsibility, Attitude Towards Behavior, Social Norms, Perceived Behavioral Control, Sense of Obligation and Behavioral Intention, were measured in terms of the observed variables BV1 to BV4, EW1 to EW4, AC1 to AC4, AR1 to AR3, ATB1 to ATB4, SN1

to SN4, PBC1 to PBC3, SO1 to SO3, and BI1 to BI3. Following this, the measurement properties of the observed variables were described by the measurement models. Subsequently, the TPB and VBN models were directly tested by the structural equation model, and all the latent variables were measured using the reliability of all observed variables. Finally, a structural equation model was developed from the hypothesized conceptual framework.

In conclusion, with regard to the analysis of the data, nine constructs were included in the measurement variables, which are the biospheric values, the ecological worldview, the awareness of consequences, the ascription of responsibility, the sense of obligation to take pro-environmental action, the attitude towards behavior, the subjective norms, the perceived behavioral control, and the behavioral intention. A satisfactory level of the data fit, in which all fit indices were greater than 0.9, was reported from the assessment using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of all constructs. Satisfactory levels of construct reliability above 0.7 were reported by the construct reliability (CR) of each construct. The results of the structural equation modeling revealed an acceptable confidence level with regard to the path analysis of behavioral intention and its dependent variables.

Based on the structural model results, hypothesized relationships were tested, from the results of hypotheses testing all hypotheses were supported, the estimates of the standard coefficients showed that (BV-EW = 0.703), (EW-AC = 0.245), (AC-AR = 0.518), (AC-SN = 0.423), (AC-PBC = 0.442), (AC-ATB = 0.507), (SN-SO = 0.396), (AR-SO = 0.308), (SN-BI = 0.364), (SO-BI = 0.095), (PBC-BI = 0.166), (ATB-BI = 0.198). Compare with other variables, the direct effect of subjective norm on the behavioral intention is the highest. As shown from Figure 1, all variables from proposed model accounted for 45.5% of variance in behavioral intention shows a large effect from variance which represent a high level of prediction to the behavioral intention from the proposed framework.

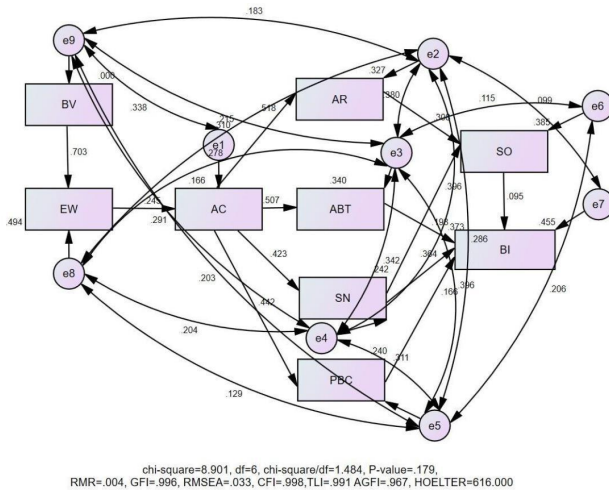


Figure 2 Structural equation modeling in path analysis

Table 3 Summary of the results of the hypotheses testing

| Hypothesis and path in the model | Standardized regression weights | Critical ratio C.R. | Hypothesis testing |
|--|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| H1 Biosphere Value → New Ecological paradigm | 0.703 | 20.607 | Supported |
| H2 New Ecological Paradigm → Awareness of Consequences | 0.245 | 4.234 | Supported |
| H3 Awareness of Consequences → Ascription of Responsibility | 0.518 | 12.927 | Supported |
| H9 Awareness of Consequences → Attitude Toward the Behavior | 0.507 | 12.603 | Supported |
| H10 Awareness of Consequences → Subjective Norm | 0.423 | 9.672 | Supported |
| H11 Awareness of Consequences → Perceived Behavioral Control | 0.442 | 10.312 | Supported |
| H12 Subjective Norm → Sense of Obligation | 0.396 | 8.809 | Supported |
| H4 Ascription of Responsibility → Sense of Obligation | 0.308 | 6.848 | Supported |
| H5 Sense of Obligation → Behavioral Intention | 0.095 | 2.017 | Supported |
| H6 Attitude Toward the Behavior → Behavioral Intention | 0.198 | 4.244 | Supported |
| H7 Subjective Norm → Behavioral Intention | 0.364 | 7.837 | Supported |
| H8 Perceived Behavioral Control → Behavioral Intention | 0.166 | 3.646 | Supported |

Discussion

Due to the increasing concern for environmental issues and the need for the development of the hotel industry that is focused on sustainability, it is essential to achieve an improved understanding of the intentions of travelers to choose green accommodations. Nevertheless, the previous research included in the literature on how the development of pro-environmental intentions can be conducted in the area of environmentally friendly hotels is still limited. Moreover, to date, there has been no research in this area that has examined Chinese tourists, who represent the highest number of travelers in the global tourism market.

This current study was conducted to investigate the factors that exert an influence on Chinese tourists' intention to choose to stay at green hotels by applying a combined model of the TPB and the VBN. the result of

this study shows a high prediction power ($R^2 = 0.455$) of the combined model to the behavioral intention. The empirical research results demonstrate that the subjective norms, attitude, perceived behavioral control and sense of obligation of Chinese guests positively affect their pro-environmental intentions. Furthermore, this study's results also show that the intention of travelers from China to choose to stay at green accommodations receives a positive impact from their environmental concerns, namely their biospheric values, ecological worldview, awareness of consequences, and ascription of responsibility. These findings concur with those of previous research studies that applied the TPB and the VBN models to examine the intentions of consumers to engage in activities for environmental conservation (Chen & Tung, 2014; Choi, Jang, & Kandampully, 2015).

Compare with other study variables, subjective norms have the most significant influence on intention, the decision of individual is influenced by the relevant others. When the Chinese tourists feel the social pressure from their family members, friends and colleagues regarding to stay at an eco-friendly hotels they are more willing to choose an eco-friendly hotel when they travel, a possible reason for this result can be explained by considering that cultural factors are a central part of Chinese society, a collectivist society in which the views of the significant referents surrounding them, such as the members of one's family, close friends, colleagues, and social media influencers, provide a major influence on their decision-making process, and they are more likely to emulate the behavior of others. Most of the Chinese tourists who travel to Thailand are with their family members or friends, when traveling as part of a group, Chinese tourists feel a sense of obligation due to being a member of the tour group with regard to the exchange of information related to environmental responsibilities and social norms.

This study also identified perceived behavioral control and attitudes towards behavior as main determinant that effect Chinese tourists' intention to stay at an eco-friendly hotel when traveling. When a Chinese tourist has more positive attitude towards stay at eco-friendly hotels, he or she will be more willing to choose an eco-friendly hotel when traveling and a Chinese tourist will be more likely to stay in eco-friendly hotel when there are resources and opportunities to support them with the selection of the eco-friendly hotel.

The Chinese hotel guests' sense of obligation toward patronizing eco-friendly hotels is impacted by their environmental concerns. The effects of environmental concerns on the sense of obligation and the intention to choose to patronize eco-friendly hotels are positively related. The positive influence from environmental concerns on intention is possibly a result of the Chinese government's efforts involved with environmental education, as the government has implemented active strategies and made a strong effort to provide guidance and motivation to the Chinese people so that they perform the behaviors related to environmental conservation in their daily lives. In addition, Chinese society operates on the basis of the high-power distance dimension, and the Chinese people therefore normally display a high level of obedience to centralized authority and respond quickly to the policies of the government.

In order to promote Thai Eco-friendly hotels to Chinese tourists. First, the government institutions from both Thailand and China should provide information and knowledge to Chinese tourists in order that they feel a moral obligation to conserve the resources of our only planet regardless of whether they are in their own country or visiting another country, it was shown by the findings that when Chinese hotel guests possess a higher level of environmental concerns, they will also hold an attitude toward staying at eco-friendly hotels that is more positive and therefore behave in a suitable manner when traveling abroad in Thailand. Second, the eco-friendly hotels should promote themselves from mass media and hotel booking website to increase the hotel guest's awareness of the eco-friendly hotel option when hotel guest search for the hotel. Moreover, the eco-friendly hotels in Thailand should launch a campaign of marketing initiatives that will inform and remind their Chinese hotel guests about the practices conducted by environmentally friendly accommodation for the improvement of our eco-system. The eco-friendly hotels should create videos that can be played in the hotel lobbies and the rooms of the guests about the threats to the environment found at conventional hotels compared to the environmentally friendly actions that are taken in their own hotel operations, including in their guest rooms, restaurants and supply chain. Finally, the green hotels should clearly explain to their guests the ways in which they can perform the appropriate behaviors to promote environmental conservation and also provide them with incentives for the purpose of motivating them.

Limitations of this research

There are several limitations involved with this research work. First, the focus of this research is on the intention of the hotel guests rather than their actual behavior. In the previous research, a large number of researchers have used the words 'intention' and 'behavior' interchangeably (Han, 2015); however, intention represents the cognitive aspect of hotel guests, and thus differs from their actual behavior (Belk, 1985). Regarding the further research studies, the actual behavior of tourists can be examined through the use of an appropriate research methodology. It is also suggested that future researchers increase the size of the sample as well as the range of the tourist destinations. Moreover, the Hong Kong Chinese, Singaporean Chinese, and Taiwanese Chinese populations should be sampled in future studies for the purpose of gaining an expanded comprehension of the pro-environmental behavior of the Chinese people in general.

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