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HEALTH TOURISM IN CHINA: CONSUMER INSIGHTS AND MARKET POTENTIAL

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Abstract:

With the development of the global economy, improving living conditions, and the increasing focus on health, health tourism has been rapidly developed worldwide. China is no exception. As medical standards and living conditions improve, the Chinese health tourism market is gradually emerging. Due to people's emphasis on a healthy lifestyle, the "total health" industry is entering a new rapid growth phase. As an emerging field that combines tourism with the "comprehensive health" industry, health tourism has significant development potential and a favourable market environment. However, despite the growth of the tourism sector in China, there remains a gap in understanding the behaviour of local tourists regarding health tourism. Most existing literature focuses on factors influencing Western tourists to come and visit China for health tourism. At the same time, less research has emphasised understanding domestic tourist choices. Consumers' decisions undoubtedly have a substantial impact on the industry as health tourism evolves. This research uses the primary data method to investigate factors impacting consumer decisions about health tourism in China. A questionnaire was given online, and this study received 133 responses. A factor study demonstrated that comprehensive medical quality and cost-related aspects influence Chinese consumers' decisions about health tourism in China. The findings also indicated that they are optimistic about the growth of China's health tourism industry. This study contributes to the literature by identifying key determinants of consumer decision-making in health tourism and provides practical insights for industry practitioners.

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Introduction

Health Tourism

The World Health Organization (1946) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Health tourism is a form of tourism designed to provide an experience that promotes physical and mental health and overall well-being. Health tourism is sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of wellness tourism. Wellness tourism refers to travel undertaken by individuals across national borders or within national territories to seek health care, rehabilitation, or health promotion. It combines elements of healthcare, tourism, and rehabilitation to deliver an integrated health service and travel experience.

The following (Table 1) is the definition and view of some scholars and institutions at home and abroad on health tourism:

Table 1: Definitions and Views of Scholars on Health Tourism

Scholar	Definitions and views
Connell (2006)	Wellness tourism refers to people seeking medical, dental and surgical treatment while on extended vacation.
Wang et al. (2012), Liu (2008)	Health care tourism can be divided into two parts: one aimed at the pure treatment of diseases and the other focused on health care tourism and leisure.
Synder et al. (2013)	Health care tourism refers to the international travel of patients seeking medical services.
Hou et al. (2013)	The narrow concept of wellness tourism focuses on treatment, while the broad concept includes all health-themes tourism services, such as medical treatment, health care, physical examination, rehabilitation and nursing.
Heng (2018)	International health tourism should focus on its medical connotation by providing medical treatment, health care, physical examination, rehabilitation and health care purposes.

According to the table above, the difference between health tourism and wellness tourism lies in their focus and connotation. Health tourism emphasises obtaining a wide range of health-related services, such as physical examination, health care and rehabilitation care. In contrast, wellness tourism focuses more on combining leisure tourism with medical services, particularly obtaining specific medical services such as medical, dental and surgical treatment during long-distance vacations.

With growing public interest in health, health tourism has been developed rapidly worldwide. In China, improvements in medical standards and living conditions are contributing to the gradual emergence of the health tourism market. There is a wealth of mature literature on health and wellness tourism, both domestically and internationally. At the same time, China's health tourism market is growing rapidly.

China's Health Tourism Market in Recent Years

In recent years, with an increasing emphasis on healthy living, the "great health" segment has rapidly entered a new phase of growth. Health tourism, which combines tourism with the "big health industries, benefits from a favourable market environment and represents a blue ocean market with substantial development potential. According to the National Technical Committee for Tourism Standardization in May 2022, the turnover of health tourism reached 40 billion Yuan (approximately USD6.2 billion) in 2015 and increased to 833 billion Yuan (approximately USD12.8 billion) in 2019. Although the 2020 global pandemic caused a temporary decline to 81.3 billion Yuan, the market showed resilience with a projected recovery of 90 billion Yuan (USD13.8 billion) by 2021.

Liuyue and Ko (2022) mentioned that China's medical tourism sector is in its infancy compared to more established countries such as Thailand and South Korea. Jiang (2025) highlighted the main weaknesses in China's medical tourism were gaps in service quality, international brand recognition, and global competitiveness.

Shi and Xu (2019) suggested that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) should be the focus of China's differentiated strategy for international health tourism. They suggested aligning TCM clinical practice and service protocols with international norms to attract tourists. Liu et al. (2022) agree that the TCM tourism sector needs to adopt global best practices, training and standardised protocols.

Under these economic conditions, China's health tourism industry faces significant challenges. Thus, the focus is put on the primary motivations for consumers to choose health tourism. Factors to be considered are cost, the quality of medical institutions, and the bundled sales of medical packages.

Literature Review

Cost

In recent years, China has attracted a large number of domestic and foreign patients seeking medical treatment due to its relatively low costs and high-quality medical services. This significant cost advantage has become an important motivation for consumers to choose health tourism.

Studies have shown that medical costs in China are generally lower than in many Western countries. For example, dental implants cost an average of about \$3,000 in the United States, compared to just \$1,000 in China; Similarly, plastic surgery costs approximately \$6,500 in the United States, while it is about \$3,000 in China (Lost in China, 2026). Additionally, health tourism abroad also incurs high international travel costs and living expenses, such as airfare and accommodation for flights from China to the United States, which significantly increase the total cost. Health tourism in China allows consumers to avoid these additional expenses while also benefiting from cultural and language conveniences that reduce communication barriers and psychological stress.

Medical Institutions

Regions such as Hainan, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen have taken the lead in exploring the field of medical tourism by building a comprehensive health tourism framework and introducing internationally advanced medical equipment and technology. In terms of infrastructure for health and medical tourism, China has invested substantial resources into projects like the Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone, which offers convenient medical tourism services for international patients. The comprehensive medical service model covers medical treatment, medical cosmetology, rehabilitation and recuperation, and health care, strengthening China's health tourism sector's competitiveness. Therefore, China is expected to become an important player and leader in the global health tourism industry, facilitating the transformation of health tourism from outbound to inbound and retaining the medical tourism group within domestic consumption.

After nearly five years of exploration and testing, the Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone has become a prominent player in Hainan's medical and health sector. According to Hainan Provincial Health Commission, in 2018, the added value of the medical and health industry maintained a growth rate of more than 2.4% each quarter. The operating revenue of the Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone reached 328 million yuan, up 228% year-on year. The number of patients treated was 28,696, representing a year-on-year increase of 68.8%. Additionally, the number of foreign guests received by the Chinese medicine service trade increased by 24.8 percent. Thus, Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone has become a unique health tourism "experimental field" in China (Hainan Provincial People's Government Office, 2022).

Travel Package

In health tourism, some destinations boast rich scenic resources but lack effective integration methods. Therefore, many scenic spots have launched tourist package combinations to enhance consumers' travel motivation. Comprehensive travel packages that combine medical care, leisure activities, sightseeing and cultural experiences significantly impact individuals' choice of wellness destinations. These packages often offer added value and convenience, attracting travellers seeking a total experience rather than just medical care. The introduction of health tourism packages not only innovates in ticket pricing but also positively enriches the travel experience (Zhou et al., 2005).

Smith and Puczko (2021) stated that the availability of bundled travel packages that combine medical treatment with leisure activities, sightseeing and cultural experiences can influence individuals' decisions about wellness travel destinations. These packages often offer added

value and convenience, appealing to individuals seeking a holistic experience beyond mere medical care.

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed to assess respondents' demand for health tourism products, their experiences with medical tourism institutions, and the influence of bundled travel packages on their choice of destinations. The questionnaire consists of the following parts: The first part is the basic personal information of the respondents, including the tourists' gender, age, economic and income status, education background and main health tourism destinations. The second part investigates the current situation of respondents' purchasing regarding health tourism products in China based on the three influencing factors: whether they are willing to pay for health tourism products, what type of medical tourism organisation products they are primarily interested in purchasing, and their intention to buy health travel packages bundled with other travel services.

This study utilises a multi-stage sampling approach. In the first stage, stratified random sampling was used to select nine cities, which include Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Qingdao, Xiamen and Nanning. These cities were selected to cover a range of geographies, economic levels and demographics, thereby ensuring the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the study. First-tier cities (such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou), second-tier cities (such as Chengdu, Hangzhou, and Wuhan), and third-tier cities (such as Qingdao, Xiamen, and Nanning) were included to ensure the diversity in the data. The sampling strategy was to achieve an equitable distribution of respondents across all three city categories.

Next, questionnaires were distributed both online and offline: online through social media and professional survey platforms, and offline at community hospitals, health centres, health clubs and other locations. This was to maximise reach and minimise digital bias.

The collected data were then analysed using statistical software (SPSS), employing methods such as reliability and validity analysis, descriptive statistical analysis and exploratory factor analysis to explore the specific influence of variables such as cost, medical institutions and travel packages on consumers' choices regarding health tourism. A total of 133 valid questionnaires were collected. While the small sample size in this study was acknowledged, based on the equitable distribution of respondents across the three cities, as shown in Table 2, and the representation of a wide range of economic backgrounds, the sample provides a reasonable basis for analysing patterns relevant to the research objectives.

Finding and Discussions

A total of 133 valid questionnaires were collected—female respondents (54.1%) slightly outnumbered males (45.9%) (Table 2).

Table 2: Sociodemographic Profile of Respondents (N = 133)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	61	45.9
	Female	72	54.1

Age group	18 – 25 years	32	24.1
	26 – 35 years	46	34.6
	36 – 45 years	29	21.8
	46 – 55 years	17	12.8
	56 years and above	9	6.8
Education	High school or below	18	13.5
	Diploma	27	20.3
	Bachelor's degree	58	43.6
	Masters's degree	24	18.0
	Doctorate	6	4.5
Monthly Income (RMB)	< 3,000	21	15.8
	3,001 – 6,000	38	28.6
	6,001 – 10,000	36	27.1
	10,001 – 20,000	26	19.5
	>20,000	12	9.0
City Tier	First-tier cities	45	33.8
	Second-tier cities	47	35.3
	Third-tier cities	41	30.8

The largest age group was 26 – 35 years (34.6%), followed by 18 – 25 years (24.1%). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (43.6%), suggesting a relatively well-educated sample. In terms of income, the majority earned between RMB 3,001 – 6,000 (28.6%) and RMB 6,001 – 10,000 (27.1%), reflecting middle-income urban consumers. Geographically, respondents were relatively evenly distributed across first-tier (33.8%), second tier (35.3%), and third-tier cities (30.8%).

A reliability and validity test was performed on questions related to expenses, medical institutions and travel packages (Table 3 and Table 4).

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

	N of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Cost	9	0.908
Medical institutions	6	0.867
Travel packages	7	0.887
Total	22	0.959

The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the cost, the medical institution, the travel package, and the total scale are 0.908, 0.867, 0.887 and 0.959, respectively. All four coefficients are higher than 0.8, indicating that the questions designed in this paper and the data results obtained have good credibility and can effectively represent the overall opinions of the respondents.

Table 4: Validity Statistics

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.944
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1219.329
	df	105
	Sig.	0.000

The KMO value of the aggregate table is $0.944 > 0.8$, $\text{sig} = 0 < 0.05$, which verifies that the questionnaire has good structural validity as a whole, and the measured error value is small.

Factor analysis was then conducted. The factor analysis identified that medical service quality and cost-related factors significantly influence consumer decision making (Table 5). The loading of each research item and factor is presented, with the corresponding common degree value of all research items being higher than 0.6.

Table 5: Factor Analysis

	1	2
When choosing a medical tourism destination, the reputation and quality of a medical facility have a big impact on you.	0.817	
You think the treatment success rate and accreditation of medical institutions are important when choosing a medical tourism destination.	0.745	
You are very concerned about the quality and safety of the services provided in your travel package.	0.744	
When choosing a medical tourism destination, you pay close attention to medical expenses.	0.726	
When choosing a travel package, you pay more attention to the medical services included.	0.719	
You feel that the expertise and technology of a medical institution are important.	0.681	
You will choose a provider with a better reputation, even if the cost is higher.	0.653	
You engage in medical tourism because medical services are more affordable at the destination.	0.635	
If the overall cost of a medical tourism destination is beyond your budget, you would consider seeking additional funding.		0.854
You can accept that the medical facilities at the destination may not have a good reputation if the cost of medical services is lower.		0.712
For you personally, the proportion of medical tourism costs has a big impact on choosing a destination.		0.636
When choosing a medical tourism destination, you pay more attention to travel costs.		0.625
You are willing to pay extra for better medical care and experience.		0.619
If the overall cost of a medical tourism destination exceeds your budget, you consider other alternatives.		0.615

You will choose a package that combines medical treatment with travel activities.		0.613
Eigenvalues	8.257	1.034
Percent of variance	55.047	6.896
Cumulative variance	55.047	61.943
Cronbach Alpha	0.927	0.905
Factor means	2.943	2.747

Factor 1: Comprehensive Medical Quality and Service Factors

The eigenvalue of factor 1 is 8.2, explaining 55.0% of the variance, and the Cronbach Alpha coefficient is 0.927, indicating that the scale has high internal consistency and reliability. Factor 1 is highly correlated with multiple research items, including the reputation and quality of medical facilities (0.817), treatment success rate and certification (0.745), and service quality and safety (0.744). This result shows that consumers attach great importance to the authority of medical institutions and the safety of medical devices when choosing health tourism, and that providing high-quality health tourism services will make consumers more willing to pay. Latief (2024) shows that the quality medical facilities, including the availability of high-standard infrastructure and services, significantly influence medical tourists' decisions when selecting a destination for treatment abroad, as quality contributes to patient confidence and satisfaction.

Factor 2: Cost And Budget-Related Factors

The eigenvalue of factor two is 1.03, explaining 6.9% of the variance, and the Cronbach Alpha coefficient is 0.905, indicating that the scale has high internal consistency and reliability. Factor 2 is primarily correlated with cost and budget-related items, including respondents are willing to get extra money is the medical trip is too expensive (0.854), willingness to accept medical facilities with poor a reputation but low cost (0.712), cost strongly affects your medical tourism destination (0.636), attention to travel expenses (0.625), willingness to pay extra fees for better medical services (0.619), consideration of alternatives when overspending (loading value 0.615), and choosing packages that include medical and travel activities (loading value 0.613). The emergence of these items in factor two suggests that while other attributes may drive initial interest, financial feasibility was utilised by consumers to refine their choices. Omar et al. (2023) found that cost is one of the key determinants influencing medical tourists' choice of destination, as affordable treatment options increase the attractiveness of a country for healthcare services. Similarly, Çapar and Aslan (2020) reported that cost savings play a significant role in destination selection, with lower medical expenses motivating patients to seek treatment abroad.

Conclusion

By analysing the influencing factors behind consumers' choice in health tourism, this paper finds that health tourism, as an important branch of the tourism industry, has attracted consumers' attention. Consumers' travel motivations primarily include pursuing a healthy lifestyle, seeking professional medical services, enjoying personalised services and experiencing rich cultural tourism. When deciding to invest in health tourism, consumers mainly consider factors such as cost, medical institutions and travel packages, which directly affect their experiences during health tourism and lead to different consumption choices.

Specifically, regarding cost factors, consumers typically compare the prices of various health tourism options and make decisions within a reasonable price range acceptable to them. In terms of medical institutions, consumers are more inclined to choose those with a good reputation, well-equipped facilities and advanced medical technology, as they believe that reputable institutions will ensure their health and safety. Additionally, the content and services included in travel packages can also influence consumers' choices, such as whether professional health tourism services are offered and the appeal of tourist destinations. In general, understanding consumers' needs and preferences, while providing competitive prices and quality services, will help attract more participants to health tourism and promote the overall development of the health tourism industry in China.

Health tourism has both positive and negative impacts on China's economy. The positive aspects include improving the international reputation of the health and medical service industry and creating employment opportunities for Chinese professionals. However, the negative aspects involve the possible outflow of high-quality medical resources and a decline in service quality due to this outflow.

When discussing the impact of health tourism on China's economy, it becomes evident that its role is not limited to attracting foreign tourists; it also significantly contributes to enhancing the consumption level of residents. However, A key consideration in promoting health tourism is whether the focus should be on external tourists or local residents. Promoting health tourism to foreign tourists can foster the international development of the domestic medical service industry and enhance China's competitiveness in the global medical tourism market. Foreign tourists typically prioritise rich cultural experiences and professional medical services, making them more inclined to choose health tourism projects. In contrast, local residents are more concerned with cost- effectiveness and the convenience of services. Promoting health tourism to local residents can raise their health awareness and improve their quality of life, thereby expanding the domestic consumer market. Therefore, the government and industry stakeholders should develop a comprehensive strategy to balance the promotion of health tourism between external tourists and local residents. This approach will help achieve the healthy development of the industry and ensure sustainable economic growth.

The future development prospects of health tourism are promising, but the Chinese government needs to implement measures to promote the growth of the industry. For example, it should strengthen the supervision of health tourism service quality and safety to prevent potential issues within the industry. Additionally, there should be efforts to optimise and upgrade industrial services based on the good service quality of local institutions. This includes vigorously developing traditional Chinese medicine techniques and traditional Chinese culture to attract consumers. Moreover, the government should strengthen training and recruitment for health tourism, expand international cooperation and exchanges, actively learn from advanced foreign technology and management practices, and advance the industry. Strengthening publicity and promotion is also crucial for enhancing the visibility and influence of the health tourism sector. The government and relevant institutions should increase the awareness of health tourism through various channels and methods to highlight its significance and appeal to consumers. Through continuous innovation and improvement, healthy tourism can become an important driving force for China's economic transformation and upgrading, as well as for the development of the tourism industry.

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