

**INTERCULTURAL
COMMUNICATION AND
MEDIATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR
ANALYSING INTERCULTURAL
COMPETENCE OF CHINESE TOUR
GUIDES**

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Abstract

This paper draws on theories of intercultural communication and mediation to develop a conceptual framework and research approach for examining the intercultural competence (IC) of Chinese tour guides and the relationship of guides' IC to Chinese tourists' experiences. The paper begins with a discussion of the importance of the Chinese inbound market globally, and in particular for Australia, and then the paper examines the role of tour guides in intercultural settings. These discussions, which are offered to establish the need for systematic inquiry in this area, are followed by a detailed presentation of a research rationale and conceptual model in which key variables and hypothesised relationships are discussed, measurement issues are addressed, and implications for research are given.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND MEDIATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE OF CHINESE TOUR GUIDES

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a conceptual framework and research approach for examining the intercultural competence (IC) of Chinese tour guides, the factors that contribute to IC, and the impacts of IC on Chinese tourists' satisfaction with their experiences. Intercultural competence is an important issue for countries such as Australia who have received Approved Destination Status (ADS) from the Chinese government, and for destinations who are seeking ADS. The paper begins with a discussion of the trends in the Chinese inbound market globally, and in particular for Australia, to demonstrate the importance of this market. The paper then examines the role of tour guides in intercultural settings, and specifically in the context of international travel by Chinese citizens. These discussions are used to build a rationale and conceptual model for research in this area.

According to Foran et al. (2000), Mainland China has led the world in economic growth for two decades. Not surprisingly, as the world's most populous nation has become wealthier, the number of Chinese outbound travelers has also increased. The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) forecasts that China will generate 100 million outbound tourists and become the fourth largest country of tourist origin in the world by 2020 (WTO 1998). In the case of Australia, the number of Chinese visitors is predicted to increase from around 93,000 in 1999 (BTR 2000) to nearly 790,000 a year by 2020, making China Australia's fourth largest market. A consistent upward trend in the size and significance of the outbound Chinese tourist market is in motion for at least the next several years. As Kelly (1999) and Davis (1999) have argued, the potential of the Chinese market for generating export earnings and creating jobs in tourism in ADS countries is enormous. Because of its relative proximity to Mainland China, Australia is expected to be a popular destination of outbound Chinese tourists.

Although Australia is one of only fifteen countries or regions that have been granted ADS by the Chinese government (CASS 2000), this number is expected to increase significantly as China continues its economic expansion as a "full-fledged" member of the world economy and as its middle class grows both in size and discretionary income. As Bridges (1999:148) put it, "here we see one-fifth of humanity now fully unleashed in an epic pursuit of material wealth". Although ADS countries like Australia have experienced significant growth in the number of Chinese visitor arrivals in the past decade (tenfold in ten years), and especially in the number of group travelers with an ADS visa in the past two years (see Table 1), Australia and other ADS countries still face stiff competition in securing their market share in the emerging Chinese market.

Table 1. Visitor Arrivals from China to Australia (thousand)

Year	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2020
No. of Visitor	16	19	22	30	43	45	66	77	93	124	160	194	790

Source: Tourism Forecasting Council August 1999; ABS 1999;2000

The data for the years typed in italics are not real figures but forecast.

To at least some degree, the outcome of this competition will be determined by the quality of the experiences that Chinese tourists encounter in the countries that host them. Clearly, making their experiences interesting, rewarding and satisfying will become increasingly important to any country wanting to sustain its market share and attract more tourists from Mainland China. As the dependence of Chinese visitors on tour guides is high, we suggest that the tour guide's performance as a cultural mediator is an important factor contributing to the quality of Chinese visitors' intercultural travel experiences. How this mediation process occurs and the variables that might influence it are the subjects we take up next.

ROLE OF TOUR GUIDES IN INTERCULTURAL SETTINGS

In intercultural settings, a cultural gap often exists between the visitor and the visited (de Kadt 1979). Visitors join guided tours for a variety of reasons, but there is increasing evidence that the desire to acquire new and rewarding intercultural experiences, and to avoid interaction difficulties in a foreign land, is a central motivation to international visitors who engage the services of a guide (Laws 1995; Weiler & Ham 2001a). As many researchers have observed (see for example, Pearce 1982 and Arnould and Price 1993), the guide's performance influences the tourist's experience in fundamental ways. For example, the guide may influence where tourists go, what they see and what aspects of the host culture they are exposed to. Likewise, foreign tour groups depend on their guide for language translation, striking the right balance between cultural buffering and immersion, and for mediating the group's interaction with host communities and social settings. Thus, tour groups travelling abroad largely experience the visited country in a way that is at least partly filtered and structured by a single mediator, their guide (Pearce 1982). The guide's role, although not the most highly compensated in the typical tour operation, emerges nonetheless as strategically important in the competitive race for the Chinese inbound market in ADS countries.

Previous studies have invoked a range of terms to describe the tour guide's mediating role in cross-cultural or intercultural settings. These include *cultural mediator*, *go-between*, *cultural broker*, *cultural buffer* and *intermediaries* (Nash 1978; de Kadt 1979; Schmidt 1979; Holloway 1981; Pearce 1984; Cohen 1985; Weiler, Johnson and Davis, 1992; Hughes 1991; Laws 1995; Noam 1999). In the present discussion, Taft's (1981) term "cultural mediator" will be used. Specifically, cultural mediator refers to a person who "facilitates communication, understanding and action between people differing in language and culture" (Taft 1981:53).

Several studies (e.g., Wong and Ap 1999 and Geva and Goldman 1991) have suggested that tour guides play a direct role in mediating cultural exchange between visitors and host cultures and ultimately in enhancing tourists' experiences. Generally speaking, the degree to which a guide is capable of being an effective cultural mediator is referred to as intercultural competence (IC). As Geva and Goldman (1991), among others, have argued, the tour guide's performance is a central attribute of a successful tour. Given the importance of guides as cultural mediators for Chinese tourists in ADS countries, research on factors influencing IC, and on IC's effect on tourist satisfaction, seems both timely and important.

Nearly twenty years ago, Pearce (1982) argued that the mediating effect of tour guides on intercultural tourist experiences represented an area in need of research. Yet little systematic attention to IC and tour guiding has materialised in the ensuing years. As Gurung et al. (1996:124) observed, "In spite of repeated suggestions in the literature on the potential contribution of guides as mediators of tourism encounters, scant research has been conducted on tour guides' performance as cultural mediators."

No known studies have been conducted on the IC of Chinese tour guides, probably because the expansion of the Chinese outbound tourism market is a relatively recent phenomenon. Theory and research have not anticipated the aforementioned increase in Chinese tourists in countries like Australia, despite its obvious importance to Australia's tourism coffers. The aim of this paper is to attempt a theoretical synthesis of what is known about IC and about tour guiding, in an effort to guide systematic research in this important area, and to begin to sort out key variables and corresponding measurement issues. Although our focus is on Australia, the theoretical reasoning outlined in the foregoing discussions has its roots in studies conducted in many countries and should, therefore, have wide applicability.

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE-AUSTRALIAN TOUR GUIDES

Currently, Mainland Chinese tourists travel to Australia mainly as part of tour groups and rely heavily on their tour guides to reduce language and cultural barriers. To serve the needs of these visitors, tour operators almost always employ guides who are recent Australian immigrants who were born and raised in China. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these guides are excellent in terms of facilitating non-stressful, interesting and satisfying interactions for visitors. Some, however, while having the advantage of speaking their Chinese clients' language, have low levels of English language proficiency and limited knowledge of

Australian geography, history and culture. Therefore, despite their official status as "Australian residents", they struggle with cultural fluency in much the same way their clients do, and thus, we argue, lack the in-depth knowledge and cultural competencies necessary to facilitate the high quality intercultural experience that their Chinese visitors are seeking.

According to Bochner (1981), "monocultural individuals" (i.e., those competent in only a single culture) are generally ineffective mediators. To serve as a mediator between cultures, a tour guide must possess competencies that are relevant to each culture. As Taft (1981:53) argued, "the mediator must be able to participate to some extent in both cultures. Thus, a mediator must be to some extent bicultural." Bicultural guides would thus be expected to perform better than monocultural guides, and such performance would be reflected in higher satisfaction rates of Chinese tourists in a country like Australia. This is one of the central hypotheses incorporated into the conceptual framework for research presented in this paper. Prior to presenting the framework and its hypotheses, however, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the concept "intercultural competence".

COMPONENTS OF A TOUR GUIDE'S INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

A review of the literature suggests that the success of a tour guide's cultural mediation (i.e., success in facilitating positive interaction between clients and hosts and in brokering an intercultural travel experience that is non-stressful, interesting and rewarding for clients) depends largely on three factors: the guide's *knowledge*, *attitudes* and *social and interpersonal communication skills* (Schmidt 1979; Swarbrooke 1999; Wong & Ap 1999). These three dimensions (cognitive, affective and behavioural factors) also form the conceptual backdrop for much intercultural research, which has to date been largely focused on sojourners living abroad (Kim 1988; Cui and Berg 1991; Cui and Awa 1992; Cui, Berg et al. 1998; Dodd 1998) and are seen as theoretical building blocks for understanding and analysing intercultural competence in the context of tour guiding. The relevance of each of these dimensions to tour guiding is discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

According to recent research (Weiler and Ham 2001b), clients believe that effective tour guides possess deep *knowledge* of tourist sites and attractions. In addition, they must have a solid grasp of the culture they interpret as well as the culture their clients bring with them (de Kadt 1979a; Holloway 1981; Cohen 1985). Their knowledge of culture, which arguably might be regarded as the most important, includes cultural values, language, communication styles, customs and artifacts. Armed with such knowledge, tour guides can provide tourists deep insights into a destination, leading their clients to an understanding of what is "real" and "authentic" about the place in a way that is rarely possible without the assistance of a culturally competent insider (Goffman 1963; MacCannell 1976; Holloway 1981; Schmidt 1979). Such tour guides help tourists to understand and accept local customs without passing value judgments on them, and they are able to show visitors how to act in a manner that does not run counter to local norms and local ways of thinking (Noam 1999). A guide's knowledge of language is also critical in cultural mediation. A tour guide who is fluent in the languages of both guest and host can "represent one culture to another faithfully and thereby contribute to mutual understanding and accurate cross-cultural knowledge" (Bochner 1981:3).

A tour guide's knowledge alone, however, is not alone sufficient in mediation. Guides also need to have *attitudes* conducive to effective mediation, including empathy both for the visitors they lead and for their hosts (Holloway 1981). As tourists in guided tours may have little direct contact with locals, local tour guides are assumed by overseas clients to represent many of the national characteristics of the host population (Holloway 1981). The attitude they project will, in the eyes of the visitor, reflect much about the local culture and constitute a lasting impression about the destination that visitors will take home with them. It is perhaps this element of the guide's influence on the psyche of the tourist that is most important when word-of-mouth accounts of the tourist destination are passed on to friends, family and other potential new clients. Tour guides of international guests bear the heavy burden of ambassadorial responsibility, which at a minimum must involve conspicuous displays of respect and empathy for both cultures.

Tour guides must also have *social and interpersonal communication skills* to mediate encounters between visitors and the local population, and to role model appropriate behaviours. As Gurung et al. (1996) explain,

cultural misunderstandings may be avoided or reconciled more easily by guides who have intercultural understanding and the ability to communicate effectively between cultures. Effective communication means that guides negotiate shared meanings with dissimilar individuals and display appropriate and effective behaviours to achieve outcomes that both they and their clients desire (Ting-Toomey 1999).

One of the guide's most important communication roles is that of interpreting the physical and cultural landscape for their clients. According to Moscardo (1999), the effective use of interpretation techniques helps to bridge the cultural differences between tourist and host. Good interpretation uses a planned effort to create for the visitor an understanding of the history and significance of events, people, and objects with which the site is associated (Alderson and Low 1985). Effective tour guides, for example, make ample use of examples and comparisons to interpret the unfamiliar world in terms of things their visitors are familiar with (Ham 1992), and attempt to emphasise connections and minimise the "effects of unfamiliarity" (Dann 1996:173).

However, the performance of tour guides can vary widely. Culturally inattentive tour guides can compromise an entire travel experience through insensitivity, communication problems or an authoritarian style projected at the wrong time (Lopez 1980). It is also possible for a tour guide to isolate tourists from a visited community (Schmidt 1979), effectively depriving them of the very connection they came to experience, even though they may be unaware that it is happening. With this type of "insulated adventure" experience, those tourists in search of something different and exotic may be dissatisfied and the experience may fall far short of achieving mutual understanding (Wang 1999).

TOWARD A MODEL FOR ANALYSING THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE OF CHINESE TOUR GUIDES

While we might hypothesise that a tour guide's IC has a positive effect on visitors' satisfaction with their intercultural travel experience, the tourism literature reveals little empirical attention to what factors contribute to tour guides' intercultural competence or to visitors' reactions to tour guides as mediators in an intercultural context. We have therefore turned to the intercultural and mediation literature to develop a conceptual framework and research approach for examining Australia-based Chinese tour guides' intercultural competence.

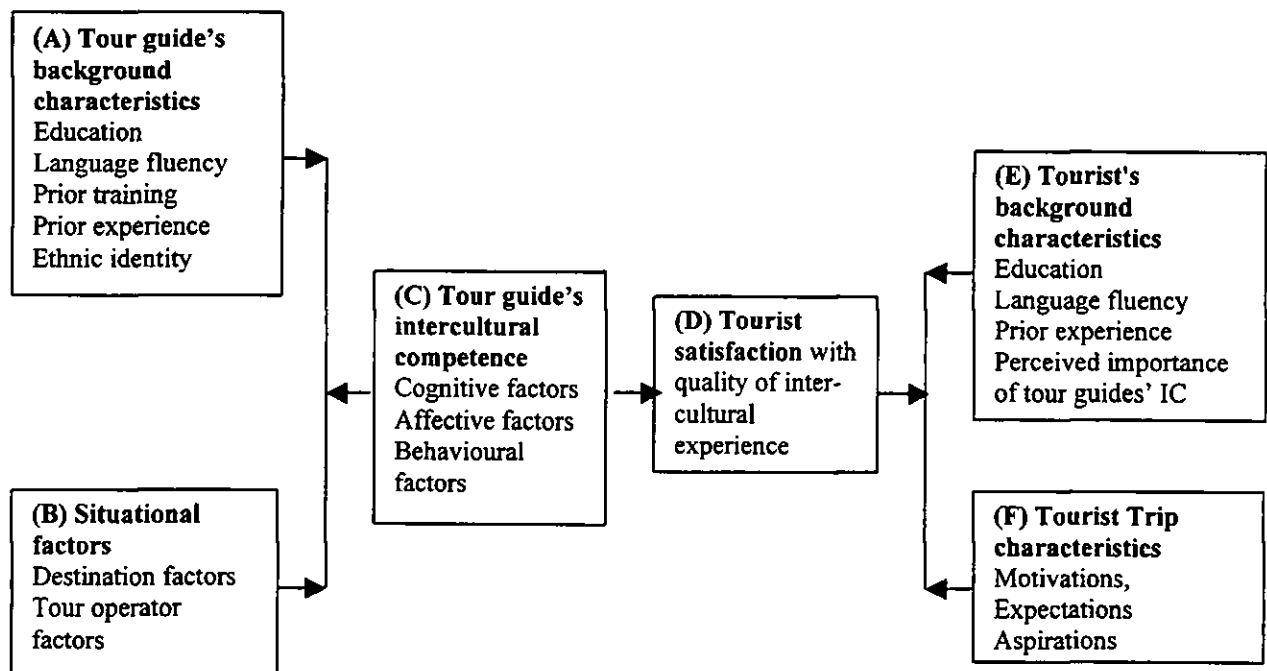
The conceptual framework outlined in Figure 1 attempts to identify factors that contribute to a Chinese tour guide's intercultural competence and subsequently to the quality of the tourist's experience. As suggested earlier, cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of IC emerge from the literature as central aspects of a sojourner's ability to adapt (Kim 1988; Cui and Berg 1991; Cui and Awa 1992; Cui, Berg et al. 1998; Dodd 1998) and are the key elements of intercultural communication competence (Chen & Starosta 1996). We recommend the adoption of this multi-dimensional framework as a basis for empirically investigating the intercultural competence of tour guides (see Box C in Figure 1). The next section of this paper outlines the underpinning theory for this "dependent variable" and its relationship to the other variables shown in Figure 1.

TOUR GUIDES' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE (BOX C)

According to the literature, the intercultural competence of a sojourner often includes ability to deal with psychological stress, ability to communicate effectively, and ability to establish interpersonal relations (Hammer, Gudykunst et al. 1978). In the current context of tour guiding, intercultural competence is defined as a general assessment of a tour guide's effectiveness in intercultural communication and mediation, using the three dimensions discussed previously and illustrated in Box C.

Based on prior research, a number of expected relationships can be hypothesised and investigated in a study of intercultural competence of tour guides. These are discussed next and illustrated in the arrows flowing from Boxes A, B, E and F in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for analysing the factors contributing to tour guides' IC and the tourist experience



FACTORS INFLUENCING TOUR GUIDES' IC (BOXES A AND B)

To illustrate the relationships in Figure 1, the following discussion draws on Australian examples. Past research demonstrates that characteristics of individuals such as training, previous experience and acculturation levels are significant factors in a sojourner's adaptation (e.g. Taft 1981; Ward & Kennedy 1996). These factors are therefore also likely to influence the competence of the tour guide as mediator. We hypothesise that tour guides' educational level, training and previous intercultural experience (Box A) are associated or correlated with IC (Box C). Of particular relevance in the Australian context, we suggest that the tour guides' ethnic identity based on the level of acculturation within the Australian culture is a key factor affecting the guide's performance as a cultural mediator. Earlier in this paper we discussed the fact that many tour operators in Australia employ recent Chinese immigrants as tour guides, and that these individuals may or may not be acculturated into Australian society. We hypothesise that a person who is bicultural (Chinese/Australian) is more likely to be interculturally competent than a monocultural guide, since the bicultural individual can participate to some extent in both cultures and be more competent in both cultures (Taft 1981).

The literature notes that situational and environmental variables (Box B) can also account for intercultural effectiveness variance (Ward & Kennedy 1996:113). In a guide tour context, the destination setting and the tour operator's organisational culture might be considered as two important situational and environmental variables. Destination settings such as whether they are natural or cultural, remote or urban may contribute to the competence of the guides. For example, a visit to an Aboriginal community requires tour guides to have adequate knowledge and appropriate attitudes and behaviour towards Aboriginal culture. If the visited place is a built tourist attraction, there may be less of a need for this type of intercultural competence. The organisational culture of the companies employing guides might also enable or constrain tour guides' effective intercultural behaviour. For example, if an organisation employing tour guides believes that the quality of the tourist's intercultural travel experience is important, it will encourage and reward their tour guides' effective intercultural behaviour. The operator also has considerable influence over nature of the tour experience advertised and delivered such as the itinerary, group size and quality of product.

FACTORS AFFECTING VISITOR SATISFACTION WITH THE QUALITY OF TOURISTS' INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE (BOXES C, D, E AND F)

We hypothesise that a tour guide's intercultural competence (Box C) has a positive effect on visitors' satisfaction with the quality of their intercultural travel experience (Box D). Tour guides' intercultural competence, i.e. the knowledge, attitude and behaviour they demonstrate in intercultural communication and mediation will affect their performance as a tour guide and a cultural mediator. Their performance in turn will affect tourists' satisfaction with their intercultural travel experience.

There are, of course, other factors that influence tourist satisfaction. Previous studies have linked tourist satisfaction to various socio-demographic characteristics, travel motivations, expectations and selected perceptions (Hughes 1991; Mossberg 1995). Chief among these variables are education, occupation, gender, age, and perceived importance of tour guides' performance. One of the research findings by Mossberg (1995) suggested that tourists' travel experiences and demographics such as age influence the tourists' view of the performance of tour leaders. Ryan and Huyton (2001) observed that tourists' socio-demographics variables are important factors in the level of their interest in Aboriginal culture. They also suggested that "satisfaction ratings.... are associated with the level of importance attributed to those place attributes,..." (p.281). Thus, tourists' satisfaction with their intercultural experiences might be expected to vary with a number of key factors such as their sociodemographics (education, occupation, gender, age), prior intercultural experience, host language fluency and their perceived importance of tour guides' intercultural competence (Box E). We also hypothesise that tourist's motivations and expectations, and specifically their desire for an "authentic" intercultural experience (Box F), will be related to their satisfaction with tour guides' intercultural competence.

MEASURING TOUR GUIDES' IC (BOX C)

There are measurement issues associated with each of the boxes in Figure 1; this section of the paper elaborates only on those relevant to Box C (intercultural competence). Because of the documented multidimensionality of the construct "intercultural competence", we propose the adaptation of a multi-dimensional instrument, such as that developed by Cui and Awa (1992), to assess Chinese tour guides' intercultural competence. The instrument developed by Cui and Awa (1992) focuses on the respondents' subjective ratings of related items to determine the crucial factors of intercultural competence (mediation effectiveness) in reference to overseas job performance, most of which are viewed as germane to the challenges a Chinese tour guide must face.

This instrument appears to be suitable for research on guides' IC as it covers many indicators of tour guides' intercultural competence. Modifications to the instrument are necessary, however. Specifically, researchers might choose to delete Cui's and Awa's items related to personal traits such as patience and tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty since few studies have empirically documented the influence of personality traits on intercultural competence" (Ward 1996:135). On the other hand, there is evidence that personality traits such as empathy and flexibility are important aspects of effective tour guiding (Weiler & Ham, 2001b), so we recommend incorporating such traits in measuring guides' IC.

The addition of items pertaining to language translation and cultural interpretation skills would make the instrument more suitable for tour guides. Other dimensions include problem-solving ability and leadership, i.e. how tour guides reconcile cultural differences between tourist and host, and how well tour guides act as a role model to demonstrate appropriate behaviours.

Operationalizing a tour guide's IC presents a number of other measurement challenges. First, the research needs to decide how tour guides' IC should be assessed. Although self-report survey data obtained from structured and semistructured interviews and surveys are often used in intercultural research (Dinges and Kathleen 1996), the validity of the IC construct can be enhanced if multiple measurement strategies are employed. For example, if intercultural competence is also a product of "behavioural skills" (as argued by Chen & Starosta, 1996), then it makes sense to draw on others such as peers, supervisors, tour clients, and

researchers to observe a tour guide's behaviour and assess their IC, and to use these measures together with self-report measures in order to improve the validity of the data.

Second, the measurement evaluation of a tour guide's intercultural competence is likely to be culturally determined, with people from different cultures having different perceptions of or attitudes toward the processes and instruments used. At a basic level, when translating the measurement instrument, a study needs to achieve "conceptual equivalence" (Lincoln and Kallegerg 1990:49) to ensure the variables are operationalised in a way that is meaningful in multiple languages, contexts and cultures (Rosenzweig 1994:30). On a deeper level, there are issues about the globalisation of intercultural competence. Is it a construct that means the same in different cultural contexts, or is the very construct of intercultural competence culturally dependent?

A discussion of measurement issues associated with each of the other boxes in Figure 1 is beyond the scope of this paper.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined a framework for assessing Chinese tour guides' intercultural competence, extending the use of intercultural communication and mediation theory to a tourism context (tour guiding). Factors affecting the guide's intercultural competence are included in the framework, together with visitor characteristics and their combined influence on tourist satisfaction. The conceptual framework outlined in this paper suggests that a combination of these factors determines visitors' level of satisfaction with their guided intercultural experience.

Many approaches exist for studying intercultural communication competence and there is a lack of consensus on how best to conceptualise and measure the construct. As Koester et al. (1993) have observed, different assumptions lead to different concepts of intercultural competence and different goals about its desired outcome. However, the multi-dimensional approach outlined in this paper has considerable support in the literature and is both intuitively appealing and relevant to tour guiding. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate additional research on the role of IC in intercultural guiding.

Given the paucity of research in this area, the framework and measurement methods presented in this paper should prove useful to gaining a better understanding of the intercultural travel experience and the role of the tour guide in that experience. On a practical level, it is expected that an understanding of the factors affecting intercultural competence of Chinese guides, in Australia as well as in other ADS countries, will lead to insights into training needs as well as into ways that guided tour experiences for the growing Chinese market can be improved.

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- 20/01 Glennis Hanley "Union Effectiveness: It Ain't Watcha Do – It's The Way That You Do It – That's What Gets Results" (May, pp. 10).
- 21/01 Tui McKeown "The Marginalised and Vulnerable within the Professional Contractor Workforce" (May, pp. 11).
- 22/01 Phyllis Tharenou "Does Training Improve Organizational Effectiveness? A Review of the Evidence" (May, pp. 19).
- 23/01 Ron Edwards "Foreign Direct Investment: One Element of Corporate Strategy" (May, pp. 15).
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- 26/01 Sonja Petrovic-Lazarevic "Electronic Business Culture Ethical Dilemmas" (May, pp. 9).
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- 30/01 Paula Darvas, Carol Fox & William Howard "Trade Union Finance: Lacunae in Regulation" (May, pp. 18).