



# Souvenir shopping experiences: A case study of Chinese tourists in North Korea



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Paper analyses experiences of Chinese tourists shopping for souvenirs in North Korea.
- Research is based on participant observation and interviews using phenomenographic approaches.
- A purposive sample 50 respondents is used.
- Both contextual issues of North Korea and generic motives for souvenir shopping are found to be important.
- The unpolluted atmosphere of North Korea motivates the purchase of many tradition Chinese medicines.

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## ABSTRACT

This study (premised on inductive approaches) examines Chinese tourists' souvenir shopping experiences in North Korea, a unique destination by reason of its strict controls over tourism, where even a self-drive tourist must have a North Korean guide in the car accompanying the driver and passengers. Consequently tourist souvenir shopping can only be undertaken at approved retail outlets. The paper reports findings based on fifty in-depth interviews analysed with the help of Leximancer textual analysis software. This study confirms that, in this context, gift-giving for relatives and friends remains an important motivation for Chinese tourists to purchase souvenirs. The most popular souvenir was traditional Chinese medicine, especially for elderly tourists. Chinese tourists described their North Korean souvenir shopping experience from four aspects: store attributes, payment methods, tour guides, and souvenir sellers. Further analysis show that elderly tourists recalled memories of their childhood while shopping in North Korean Souvenir shops. Finally, based on these findings, a model of tourist shopping is suggested.

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## 1. Introduction

Shopping, as a major tourist activity, is a crucial part of the travel experience (Correia & Kozak, 2016; Kozak, 2016) and represents a large component of visitor spending (Lloyd, Yip, & Luk, 2011). Hence shopping has become a significant source of revenue for many tourism destinations, such as Macau (Wong, 2013) and Hong Kong (Choi, Liu, Pang, & Chow, 2008). Of the items purchased by tourists, souvenirs are thought to account for a significant share of overall shopping expenditure (Lehto, Cai, O'Leary, & Huan, 2004; Turner & Reisinger, 2001). As a result, "research into souvenirs

has been a minor but consistent subtheme within the tourism literature for several decades" (Trinh, Ryan, & Cave, 2014, p. 275). Previous studies have explored souvenir shopping from various perspectives, including motivations of shoppers (Kong & Chang, 2016; Swanson & Horridge, 2006), the meaning of souvenirs (Collins-Kreiner & Zins, 2011; Swanson & Timothy, 2012), tourist and retailer perceptions (Swanson, 2004), authenticity and souvenirs (Trinh et al., 2014; Xie, Wu, & Hsieh, 2012), destination image (Wong & Cheng, 2014), purchase intentions (Kim & Littrell, 1999, 2001), and tourist satisfaction (Oviedo-García, Vega-Vázquez, Castellanos-Verdugo, & Reyes-Guizar, 2016). However, little research has been found that investigates tourists' souvenir shopping experience in countries where there is tight governmental control of tourist activities, and one such country is North Korea. This omission is thought important because the items sold in

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tourist outlets not only represent at some level the images, values and cultures of the country for which they are souvenirs, but may also represent wider economic and political values. An economic value may be imputed based on price and quality, and the potential need for foreign exchange. The political can likewise be signalled through the degrees of explicit and implicit governmental regulation applying to the retail outlets. For example, China once had its 'Friendship Stores' that were carefully controlled until relatively recently, while New Zealand seeks to enforce messages of quality through Qualmark accreditation of souvenir stores.

As a tourist destination, North Korea may be perceived as unique due to its political system. Known as the 'Hermit Kingdom', the country remains largely isolated from other countries, and while nominally 'communist' with its own political philosophy, that of the *juche* that emphasises self-reliance, it has been ruled by members of the same family for three generations. North Korea has sought to find its own solutions to problems through its own revolution and reconstruction, both independently and creatively. It limits contact between those tourists who do visit (and who are tolerated for both economic and political reasons) and the resident population. Hence, for this study it can be noted that all souvenir shops in North Korea are owned by the government. Moreover, international tourists are only allowed to go shopping in designated souvenir shops, and are actively debarred from shopping at other locations. It is possible that tourists' souvenir shopping experiences in North Korea may be unique in the world. Due to the 'special' relationship between China and North Korea created by the Korean War, more than 80% of international tourists to North Korea emanate from mainland China (Li, 2010). Because of these special circumstances, this study examines Chinese tourists' souvenir shopping experiences in North Korea. More specifically, this study pursued three research objectives: 1) to identify souvenir products purchased in North Korea; 2) to identify the motivational factors for Chinese tourists to purchase souvenirs in North Korea; and 3) to delineate Chinese tourists' attitudes towards souvenir purchasing in North Korea. In doing so it adopts an inductive process, and the paper concludes by suggesting a model for further subsequent research.

In selecting the above research questions, the authors are aware of a wider gestalt, in that motives for souvenirs are about processes of acquiring mementos of place that have attributes that attract the tourist in the first place. Consequently a linkage is implied between the motive for a visit to a place and the motive for the purchasing of a souvenir. Following the earlier work of Li and Ryan (2015) the North Korean situation is described in Fig. 1.

Li and Ryan (2015) identify a number of reasons as to why Chinese tourists visit North Korea, and these are listed in the left hand box of Fig. 2. It is suggested that these motives can have link with the motives to make souvenir purchases in North Korea. For example, Chinese may be interested in purchasing traditional Chinese medicine from a place perceived as having a cleaner environment that might imply a higher quality medicine. Alternatively they may wish to buy items that show 'revolutionary slogans' that evoke the China of the Maoist period of the past.

In addition, as Timothy (2005, p.15) establishes in his book on shopping, leisure and tourism, the act of shopping is one that many people find pleasurable. Not only is it a leisure activity, but he notes "Bargain shopping can serve both economic value and hedonic pleasure as paying a lower price saves money and can result in a surprisingly unexpected exchange. Also, meeting intended buying goals (utilitarian) can serve to enhance the "self-concept" and provide a sense of satisfaction" (Timothy, 2005, p.15). In short the buying experience becomes part of the tourist experience, and the purchased item may also bring a memory of the context and time of the purchase. This may be specifically so when the context of the

shopping is very different from that which is familiar to the purchaser.

Consequently much of this paper seeks to answer the three above concerns of motive, attitudes and products purchased within the specific context of a North Korean shopping experience that, as described below, is very different from the context normally experienced by Chinese tourists. The remainder of the paper therefore examines more closely some of the literature as it applies to souvenir shopping and the role of such shopping within Chinese culture, and then proceeds to the modes of research and the findings.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Souvenirs

Souvenirs are universally associated with tourism as a commercially produced tangible item specifically purchased to remind tourists' of intangible experiences of place (Swanson & Horridge, 2006). Apart from its significant commercial value, souvenirs, as a means to transmit the culture and history of a destination to tourists, also have a symbolic value (Litirell et al., 1994). Hence, souvenirs are playing an important role in sustaining tourism development given the commercial, cultural and historical significance of souvenirs (Tosun, Temizkan, Timothy, & Fyall, 2007).

The assortments of souvenir products sold to tourists are not universal (Swanson & Horridge, 2004), but tend to include arts and crafts, jewellery, leather goods, antiques, collectibles, postcards, and local products. Gordon (1986) first attempted to present a taxonomy of souvenirs in four groups, including pictorial images such as postcards and booklets, piece-of-the-rock items such as seashells and rocks, symbolic items such as miniature Eiffel Tower, and place markers such as T-shirts, coffee mugs and magnets and finally local products such as food, liquor and clothing. Swanson and Timothy (2012) have recently offered four souvenir categories: symbolic reminders, tourist commodities, other commodities and other reminders. First, the symbolic reminders are described as metonymic of events, places or experiences, imbued with meaning and consequence. The symbolic reminders are often strategically placed at home to be seen by family members and visitors and can trigger an imaginary return to memorable times and places. Second, tourist commodities refer to items found in souvenir shops and handicraft markets with an exchange value in the market place. The tourist commodities are produced, distributed and consumed with little emotional attachment. Third, other commodities refer to souvenirs purchased during a visit or holiday and so prompts memories of the travel experience when tourists' use them after returning home. Finally, other reminders are not always purchased, but exist to remind travellers of their experience. These items may include a visa in passport or a small token that was given as a gift to the tourist.

As noted earlier, souvenir-purchasing behaviour shopping has drawn both researchers and practitioners' attention due to the significance of souvenirs for destinations and tourists, and still retain importance despite the growth of photograph taking and the roles of social media as recollections of holiday-making.

### 2.2. Souvenir-purchasing behaviour

Among souvenir-purchasing behaviour studies, the most popular topic seems to be that of the motivations for souvenir purchasing (Lin, in press; Swanson & Horridge, 2006; Wilkins, 2011). Previous studies have shown that souvenir-purchasing motivations are manifold. For example, Kim and Littrell (2001) proposed two main reasons for purchasing souvenirs, including keeping

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