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Research Paper

Cultural proximity and intention to visit: Destination image of Taiwan as perceived by Mainland Chinese visitors

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ABSTRACT

The geographical and cultural distance between two places may influence the manner in which tourists from one country view the other country as a destination. The purpose of this study was to examine the imagery of Taiwan as perceived by Mainland Chinese visitors within the context of the unique historic and geopolitical relations between the two nations. The destination image and travel intentions of both actual and potential visitors to Taiwan were measured. Findings revealed four factors in both actual and potential Chinese visitors' destination image of Taiwan: destination quality, cultural proximity, destination uniqueness, and negative image. Specifically, cultural proximity was found to be the most significant and effective predictor of travel intention in the overall model as well as the actual and potential visitor models. Closer examination showed that visitors from Mainland China perceived the image of Taiwan as being home-like yet a place of mystery and adventure. The contradictory nature of this factor suggested that the cultural proximity and political tension between China and Taiwan created an ambivalent sense of mystery and familiarity towards Taiwan in the minds of Chinese visitors, which has a positive influence on their intention to visit Taiwan.

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1. Introduction

Destination image has long been one of the most popular topics in the tourism literature (Pike, 2002; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). A major reason why researchers and practitioners are so keen on examining destination image is because of its relevance to travel behavior and decision-making (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Chen, Lin, & Petrick, 2013; Chon, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Li, Pan, Zhang, & Smith, 2009; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). In general, destination image is found to influence tourists' destination preference (Goodrich, 1978), destination choice (Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007; Pike, 2006; Sirakaya, Sonmez, & Choi, 2001; Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002; Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000), intention to visit/travel/attend (Chen & Lin, 2012; Hung & Petrick, 2011; Lin, Wu, & Chang, 2006), actual travel behavior (e.g., budget, planning time, and length of stay) (Chen & Hsu, 2000), satisfaction (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Park & Njite, 2010), and future/post-trip behavior (e.g., intention to revisit and willingness to recommend) (Alcaniz, Garcia, & Blas, 2009; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Park & Njite, 2010).

In addition to measuring the concept of destination image and determining its antecedents and consequences, another common theme within destination image literature is the image difference as perceived by different groups (Awaritefe, 2004; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Bonn, Joseph, & Dai, 2005; Pike, 2002; Ryan & Aicken, 2010). As research findings generally support that destination image varies according to one's national or racial-ethnic origin, cultural difference is often used to account for the differences in how people of diverse backgrounds perceive a destination (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000). Given that the origins of tourists influence the manner in which they view a destination, the next question is: how? Geographical distance has been identified as one factor influencing destination image (Ahmed, 1991; Crompton, 1979; Dadgostar & Isotalo, 1992; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Obenour, Lengfelder, & Groves, 2005; Yannopoulos & Rotenberg, 1999). For example, Crompton (1979) discovered that the farther the distance between one's residence and the destination country, the better the destination image, while a study by Leisen (2001) showed that people from nearby states had a more favorable image of New Mexico as a destination than those from distant states. Cultural knowledge and familiarity is another reason that explains the difference in tourists' perception of a destination (Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Kastenholz, 2010; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Prentice, 2004; Richardson & Crompton, 1988). In particular, Kastenholz (2010) applied the notion of "cultural proximity" to tourism and

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examined whether cultural closeness (in terms of language and history) had an impact on destination image.

Building upon the notions of geographical distance and cultural proximity and how they relate to destination image, the international tourism flow between two countries that are not only geographically close but culturally similar presents an interesting setting for the study of destination image. One such example is the recently rapid tourism development between China and Taiwan. Since the Chinese Civil War of the 1940s, traveling between China and Taiwan had been prohibited, and it was not until the 1990s did the governments on both sides gradually loosen the restrictions on bilateral tourism flows (Guo, Kim, Timothy, & Wang, 2006). However, the lack of direct passenger flights across the Taiwan Strait forced visitors to fly via a third place (e.g., Hong Kong and Macau), which was costly and time consuming. As the relations between Taiwan and Mainland China improved over the years, the Chinese and Taiwanese governments finally agreed to launch direct flights across the Taiwan Strait in 2008 (Chen, Lin, & Petrick, 2012). Since then, the number of regular cross-strait flights has increased to over 500 flights per week, and the number of Chinese tourists allowed to visit Taiwan also rose to 4000 per day. Given the geographical distance and cultural familiarity between China and Taiwan and the recent boom in tourism flows, it would be of a timely issue to examine the destination images of Taiwan as perceived by tourists from the Mainland.

Although many neighboring countries in the world may be considered culturally similar and even share the same language, the current situation between Taiwan and China is rather unique. The political ambiguity between two separate governments has led to tense relations and competition between the two nations and their people. The fact that traveling between Taiwan and China has been restricted, if not prohibited, for so many years also increased the mutual sense of mystery and curiosity about “the other side.” Therefore, when considering the image of Taiwan held by Chinese tourists, there exists not only an element of cultural familiarity but also the mysteriousness of a forbidden land. The combination of familiarity and mystery in the ambivalent relation between China and Taiwan provides a unique example of the dynamic image of a geographically and culturally close destination.

Moreover, the rapid growth of the Chinese outbound travel market over the past decade has caught the attention of international tourism developers and researchers (Agrusa, Kim, & Wang, 2011; Hsu & Song, 2012; Li, Harrill, Uysal, Burnett, & Zhan, 2010; Sparks & Pan, 2009). As China became one of the largest tourist-generating countries in the world, many destination countries, including Taiwan, are striving to tap into the Chinese tourism market in hope of boosting their economy (Chen & Yang, 2010). The purpose of this study is to examine the imagery of Taiwan as perceived by Chinese visitors within the context of the unique historic and geopolitical relations between the two nations. Specifically, this research intends to answer the following questions: (1) How do Mainland Chinese who have visited Taiwan perceive Taiwan as a destination? (2) How do Mainland Chinese who have not visited Taiwan perceive Taiwan as a destination? (3) How do Mainland Chinese visitors' image of Taiwan affect their intention to visit Taiwan?

2. Literature review

Mayo's (1973) work on image and travel behavior marked the beginning of a stream of research on destination image. Since then, tourism scholars have embarked on a plethora of studies on how destinations are represented and perceived as well as how destination images influences the process of destination choice. A

number of review articles undertaken by Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Gallarza et al. (2002), and Tasci and Gartner (2007) have identified the major themes and topics covered in previous research, including the measurement and dimensions of destination image, image formation process, image change over time, influence of destination image on travel behavior, intention and satisfaction, effect of previous visitation and familiarity on destination image, effect of geographical distance on destination image, image differences between different groups, and image differences between representation (supply) and perception (demand).

Among the major themes within destination image research, of particular importance to this study is the effect of cultural difference, familiarity, and distance on one's perceptions of a destination. MacKay and Fesenmaier (2000, p.417) argued that “the manner in which people view images of a destination is mediated by cultural background” (p. 417). Therefore, the same destination could be perceived differently by tourists of different national origins. Lee and Lee (2009) compared Japanese and Korean tourists' perceptions of Guam as a tourist destination through importance-performance analysis, revealing that the two groups not only differed in the way they perceived Guam, but also in what they valued in a destination. For example, Japanese tourists considered Guam a fun and friendly place, which also provided good value for money, while their Korean counterparts rated Guam's performance as low in these two attributes. Joppe, Martin, and Waalen (2001) also examined different groups of visitors' perceptions of Toronto. By dividing tourists according to their national origins (i.e., Canadian, American, and overseas), Joppe et al. (2001) were able to tease out the differences in the three groups' perceived importance of destination attributes and levels of satisfaction. In general, findings showed that U.S. visitors had a much higher rating of Toronto in terms of its level of excitement in all aspects (e.g., dining, shopping, entertainment, cityscape, etc.). In Chen and Kerstetter's (1999) study of international students' perception of a rural tourism destination, they also discovered considerable differences among nine “home country” groups in what they believed to be the attributes of a rural tourism area. For example, students from East Asia and Southeast Asia had significant differences with some other groups in all four image dimensions (i.e., Infrastructure, Atmosphere, Natural amenity, and Farm life).

2.1. From cultural difference to cultural proximity

Tourists of different national origins may perceive the destination differently because of the cultural distance or similarities between their home country and the destination. One of the major themes in destination image research is the relationship between familiarity and image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Prentice, 2004). The notion of familiarity was often described as “past visitation experience.” Therefore, many studies focused on comparing the image perceptions of visitors vs. non-visitors, or first-time visitors vs. repeat visitors (e.g., Hsu, Wolfe, & Kang, 2004; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Pearce, 1982; Phelps, 1986). However, Hu and Ritchie (1993) pointed out that an individual's familiarity with a destination reflected not only one's personal visitation experience, but also one's level of knowledge about a destination. Baloglu (2001) also argued that previous travel experience represented but one dimension of familiarity, and proposed a two-dimension scale of familiarity: informational and experiential familiarity. Specifically, informational familiarity was measured by the amount of information sources used in the travel and trip planning process. One problem with Baloglu's (2001) familiarity index is that the number of information sources used does not necessarily reflect one's level of knowledge about the destination. By contrast, other studies have measured familiarity based on visitors' general knowledge about the destination country (e.g., the ability to identify its location on a map) or “knowing”/

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