



## The lived travel experience to North Korea

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Transcendental phenomenology aids the understanding of lived travel experiences.
- The lived DPRK experience consists of trepidation, self-regulation, doubt and catharsis.
- Overcoming trepidation is an essential feature of the phenomenon.
- Catharsis overcomes feelings of trepidation and the related struggle.

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### ABSTRACT

Tourism in North Korea is limited by entry bans, visa restrictions, and stringently controlled itineraries. As a consequence, the experience of visiting the country is still poorly understood by academics and practitioners alike. In order to fill this research void, this study aims to describe the essence of the lived experience of travelling to North Korea, following an approach embedded in the philosophical underpinnings of transcendental phenomenology. Based on eight narratives by tourists who have visited the country, the essence of the lived North Korea travel experience is identified as comprising dimensions of trepidation, self-regulation, doubt, and catharsis. Discussing the findings through a tourism lens, suggestions for further research are made and theoretical as well as methodological contributions are highlighted.

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### 1. Introduction

The development of tourism on the Korean peninsula is one of the most intriguing phenomena at the beginning of this century (Henderson, 2002; Kim, Prideaux, & Prideaux, 2007). In the south, the capitalist Republic of Korea (ROK) attracts a wide range of tourist segments (Choi, Lee, & Kim, 2015; Kim, Kim, Agrusa, & Lee, 2012). The isolated, totalitarian Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north, on the other hand, is still judged by most to be dangerous, secretive, and unique (Buda & Shim, 2015b). At best, the DPRK can be considered an "unusual" destination when its historical and/or political context is taken into account (Connell, 2017).

As a consequence, tourism in the DPRK is currently a minor but exotic form of economic activity (Li & Ryan, 2015; Yu & Ko, 2012) with a relatively recent history. Although early signs of tourism development have emerged as early as the 1980s, persisting with

its closure from the outside world and pursuing a policy of self-reliance (Cumings, 2013), the country has only opened up gradually, during the last decade, for wider tourism purposes (Connell, 2017). According to Connell (2017), it is believed that the main reason for this is the need for foreign currencies, such as the Chinese Yuan, the American Dollar, and the Euro. However, tourism is considered to be still far from developed.

With the exception of Chinese day trippers crossing into the DPRK via land for mostly business purposes (Buda & Shim, 2015a, 2015b; Reilly, 2014a, 2014b), most travelers from the west, as well as non-Chinese Asians, fly into the capital, Pyongyang. A few licensed and specialized tour operators assist and guide tourists within an itinerary that is narrowly defined, officially approved, and under strict surveillance, usually lasting for approximately a week (Buda & Shim, 2015a; Connell, 2017).

Estimates highlight that the current regime of the DPRK aims at increasing inbound tourist numbers from approximately 100,000 in 2014 to 2 million by 2020 (Winsor, 2015). Accordingly, substantial efforts have been undertaken to rebrand the country, with the inauguration of a newly built luxury ski resort and continuous

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investment in its long coastline. However, diversification of the tourism product still seems to be far off, as the DPRK is currently not considered particularly attractive for tourists “seeking beach resorts, theme parks, self-drive exploring or time to relax” (Codrington, 2013, p. 413).

As such, recently scholars have discussed what motivates tourists to visit the country. Buda and Shim (2015a, 2015b) suggested that they might be looking for “darkness”, while other studies suggest that it could be understood as a form of serious political tourism (Connell, 2017; Isaac, 2010), embedded in the propaganda of a totalitarian regime (Zuo, Huang, & Liu, 2015). This study follows another line of research and is not concerned with the antecedents and evaluation of a trip, which is commonly considered to be part of the tourist experience (Ryan, 1997; 2010). Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to phenomenologically describe the “essence” of the experience of travelling to the country; Whereas essence denotes iconic building blocks which make a certain type of lived experience special (Dowling, 2007; Moran, 2000; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). The essence is then investigated through a tourism lens by relating it to previous theory.

For this purpose, this study adopts a qualitative research method embedded in the philosophical assumptions of transcendental phenomenology, which in itself is interlinked with the study of essences (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). In particular, it follows the practical approach of the phenomenologist Amedeo Giorgi (2009) through a phenomenological reduction of eight collected tourist narratives. All of the narrators had visited the country on organized tours within the year immediately before the start of the study.

The findings of this study offer a stepping stone towards a better understanding of what constitutes the overall tourist experience to the DPRK by focusing on the lived travel experience, and aims at closing a persistent gap in our academic knowledge. It is also hoped that tour operators offering trips to the country, policymakers for related safety issues and tourism marketers can use this study to better understand the phenomenon of tourism to the DPRK.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. A phenomenological outlook on the lived travel experience

The term phenomenology is derived from the Greek *phainomenon* (appearance) and *logos* (reason or word) (Stewart & Mickunas, 1974; Stewart, 1990). Phenomenology is commonly described as the study of essences (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) and phenomena are grounded within the realities of the people describing them (Moustakas, 1994; Pernecky, 2006). In other words, phenomenology is primarily concerned with discovering the essence of appearances (Stewart, 1990). As appearances are inherently related to human consciousness, it can be said that anything appearing in one's consciousness can be a subject for study using phenomenology (Li, 2000).

Although not a qualitative method in the strict sense, phenomenology as a philosophical area has been widely used as a research guideline (van Manen, 2002). It has been mainly successful in studying the human experience in the humanist and social science disciplines (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Pernecky and Jamal (2010) highlight that in the context of tourism, phenomenology should nevertheless be used with care, as it is not a method in itself but rather only a guideline which can be based on diverse philosophical assumptions. This perspective has mostly been overlooked in tourism-related studies. A careful exploration of an appropriate ontological and epistemological perspective should therefore be the core of a phenomenological study (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

A distinction can be made between Edmund Husserl's

“positivistic” or “transcendental” and Martin Heidegger's “existential” or “hermeneutic” phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology has become more popular in tourism studies and is characterized by an attempt to isolate and identify a common essence of the studied phenomenon. The researcher oneself is “bracketed out,” and is not an active shaper of knowledge. In other words, the investigator aims at a “restraining of one's pre-understanding in the form of personal beliefs, theories, and other assumptions that otherwise would mislead the understanding of meaning and thus limit the research openness” (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 16). Hermeneutic phenomenology, on the other hand, situates the researchers (and their possible biases) within the study. As such, the researcher and the participant co-create their own personal interpretation of an experience (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

Whether or not a researcher follows the principles of transcendental or hermeneutic phenomenology should largely be based on the goal of the respective research. According to Reiners (2012), transcendental phenomenological stances are typically adopted when the researcher aims at describing a phenomenon under investigation, bracketing out personal biases in the process. Hermeneutic phenomenology, on the other hand, aids studies which aim at understanding the meaning of a certain phenomenon without bracketing the investigator's related prior engagement and biases. Given the research goal of this study, namely to describe the “essence” of the experience of travelling to the DPRK, a transcendental phenomenological approach is more appropriate. Considering the limited information available about tourism in the country (Buda & Shim, 2015b), it is furthermore believed that an objective description of the lived related tourist experience can offer a first important milestone for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. However, in order to adhere to the principles of the transcendental phenomenology, a careful choice of ontological and epistemological stances is recommended (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

In terms of ontology, transcendental phenomenology should not be confused with an assumption that consciousness creates the world, but rather highlights the adopted ontological view that phenomena can be apprehended and known through pure consciousness. According to Husserl, the world can be divided into concrete (real) objects which are investigated through the exact sciences, and experiential phenomena which fall in the realm of phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009). Entities outside of experience are thus considered meaningless in transcendental phenomenology (Moran, 2000).

Epistemologically, a claim is made that the universal can be understood through the intuition of pure consciousness, rather than through a traditionally positivist empiricism. The latter is believed to overlook the importance of human experience (Moran, 2000). Moran (2000) points out that phenomenology challenges traditional notions of epistemology, oscillating between rationalism and empiricism. This offers a holistic approach encompassing objectivity and consciousness, denoting the human body as merely a mediator in the process of true experience. The core idea of phenomenology is that the subjective domain cannot be split from the natural world (Moran, 2000), a division which is traditionally assumed in positivism.

Although the seemingly positivistic characteristics of transcendental phenomenology, an understanding of Husserl's notion of “intersubjectivity” is necessary to fully grasp the study of essences. Originally understood as shared and mutual understanding, intersubjectivity in a phenomenological sense can be interpreted as a shared life-world, where subjects find themselves coordinated around a particular phenomenon (Duranti, 2010). In other words, subjective human consciousness is believed not to wholly deduce the perceived world from itself, but to be embedded in a shared context which offers sense to the world – essences which partially

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