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## Research Paper

## The influence of crisis on tourists' perceived destination image and revisit intention: An exploratory study of Chinese tourists to North Korea

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## ABSTRACT

North Korea's 2016, and subsequent 2017, nuclear tests have triggered a series of new security crises in the region. This study attempts to understand how experienced Chinese tourists respond to such destination crises by examining changes in their perceived destination image of North Korea and their intention to revisit the country following the January 2016 nuclear tests. Built upon 32 semistructured interviews, the study's findings suggest that North Korea's most recent series of nuclear tests led to divergent perceptions among different groups of Chinese tourists, border residents, and tour operators as to whether North Korea remains a safe destination for Chinese tourists to visit. While the nuclear crisis has largely contributed to Chinese tourists' negative destination image of North Korea, it does not necessarily scare them away. Results show that some Chinese tourists see North Korea as an even more 'mysterious' country after the recent crisis, a response that has actually stimulated their intention to revisit the country.

## 1. Introduction

The tourism industry is highly susceptible to natural and man-made disasters and crises (Faulkner, 2001), and events such as these have significant impacts on tourist arrivals and expenditure (Huan, Beaman, & Shelby, 2004; Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999). Extensive academic attention has been paid to understanding how the global tourism industry reacts and responds to various disasters and crises such as a financial crisis (Li, Blake, & Cooper, 2010), political instability (Ioannides & Apostolopoulos, 1999), terrorist attacks (Bowen, Fidgeon, & Page, 2014), biosecurity threats (Hall, 2005), and natural disasters (Wright & Sharpley, 2016).

The Korean Peninsula has been considered a major source of tension and instability in Eastern Asia. Officially named the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK, North Korea's continuing attempts to acquire nuclear weapons over the past two decades have alarmed the wider international community because they pose a challenge to peace in the region, and so have drawn a series of United Nations Security Council sanctions (Cullinane, 2013). As a result, North Korea faces continuing chronic economic difficulties, and, in this climate, the ability of tourism to bring in foreign exchange for the North Korean government has emerged as a new hope for North Korea's economy.

(Jonline, 2012). Given the potential importance of tourism in North Korea's economy, North Korea is beginning to adopt measures to attract more international tourists, including the construction of new infrastructure and tourist attractions such as the Masik Pass Ski Resort and Spa, and undertaking additional tourist destination promotion (BBC News, 2014). It is predicted that the number of inbound tourists to North Korea will increase from 100,000 in 2014 to 2 million in 2020 (Morris, 2015). Li (2010) points out that 80% of tourists to North Korea emanate from China, with approximately just 4000 coming from European countries (mainly from the UK and the Netherlands), and 1500 visitors from Japan.

North Korea gained Approved Destination Status (ADS) from the Chinese government in 2010. This approval permits Chinese tourists to visit North Korea as part of a tour group. 'ADS is an administrative measure by means of which the Chinese government permits its residents to travel to selected countries for personal and leisure purposes, usually on all-inclusive package tours' (Sparks & Pan, 2009, p. 483). Since 2010, the number of Chinese tourists going to North Korea has been growing rapidly. During the period 2002–2008 (Li, 2010), the annual number of Chinese tourists visiting North Korea was under 100,000. However, tourist numbers have quickly grown since then and had reached 234,000 by 2012, an increase of 22.5% over 2011's

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numbers (China National Tourism Administration, 2013). Finding recent statistics for arrivals to the ‘Hermit Kingdom’, however, remains difficult. The National Directorate of Tourism, as North Korea’s national tourism organisation, is subject to the Administration Council and is, therefore, directly controlled by the central government; thus degrees of openness as to statistics remain subject to the vagaries of political will, and one suspects, administrative skill. Nonetheless, research has found that most Chinese visitors to North Korea are strongly motivated by a desire to experience North Korea’s ‘closed and mysterious’ world, and also by nostalgia about Korean War memorials and the history of North Korea (Li & Ryan, 2015).

Over the years, the growth of Chinese outbound tourism to North Korea has tended to fluctuate because it is usually dominated by the political relationship between the two countries, and particularly by the attitude of the Chinese government. For much of the last decade, the biggest obstacle to Sino-North Korean relations has been North Korea’s nuclear programme (The Guardian, 2016). Denuclearisation and stabilisation in North Korea are the two major goals for China’s current North Korea policy (Soo-Ho, 2010). Given that China seeks to stabilise the situation on the Korean Peninsula and so benefit from stable economic development in the long term, the ongoing nuclear crisis has cooled the relationship between China and North Korea (The Guardian, 2016), and hence affected Chinese outbound tourism to North Korea.

Most recently, North Korea conducted its sixth and latest nuclear test on 3 September 2017, an event which has led to greater-than-ever security concerns internationally (CNBC News, 2017). The United Nations claimed that North Korea would attract stringent sanctions as a result of this action. China, as North Korea’s most important ally, also took part in United Nations Security Council (UNSC) actions and voiced strong criticism of the nuclear test. It is highly likely, therefore, that these more stringent economic sanctions will impose profound impacts on both North Korea’s tourism industry and its economy.

For the last two decades, China has been acting as a core force in the regional and the global security dynamics related to North Korea’s nuclear crisis (Daewon & Richey, 2015). While extensive research has examined China’s responses to the North Korea nuclear crises from political and administrative perspectives (Cathcart, 2016; Song, 2011), few studies, have looked at North Korea’s nuclear tests as a tourism crisis and examined how they have affected Korean inbound tourism. Despite Chinese tourists’ dominance of the North Korean tourism market, very limited efforts have been made to explore the experiences of Chinese tourists in North Korea (Li & Ryan, 2015), and even less, if any, attention has been paid to the role that North Korea’s continued nuclear crises have played in the tourism industry.

Adopting a qualitative approach, this study aimed to explore the links between North Korea’s nuclear crisis, its destination image, and experienced Chinese outbound tourists’ revisit intention for this country. Along with a number of border residents and tourism practitioners, a group of Chinese tourists who had visited North Korea within the three years running up to the January 2016 nuclear crisis were interviewed in order to understand how, as a destination crisis, they perceived the nuclear test, and how, in their views, the nuclear crisis had affected their perception of North Korea as a tourism destination and their intention to revisit the country in the near future.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Tourism crisis and destination image

Despite the variation in definitional constructions, destination image is generally deemed to be ‘the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination’ (Crompton, 1979, p. 18). Destination image is a critical factor influencing tourists’ selection of destinations. The cognitive and affective form the two primary components of the destination image (Crompton, 1979). Cognitive image refers to tourists’ beliefs about the destination attributes, while affective

image refers to tourists’ feelings toward the destination. Arguing that this two-dimensional approach (cognitive image and affective image) may overlook the overall evaluation of a destination, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) further propose that overall image should constitute the third component of destination image. As destination image significantly contributes to tourist loyalty (Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014), extensive efforts have been made to determine the factors influencing the destination image formation process in order to achieve better destination management (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004). Drawing on the literature, Beerli & Martín (2004) isolated nine attributes which influence tourists’ perceived destination image; these include: natural resources; general infrastructure; tourist infrastructure; tourist leisure and recreation; culture, history, and art; political and economic factors; natural environment; social environment; and, atmosphere of the place.

A number of scholars have attempted to evaluate the relationship between tourism crises and destination image (Avraham, 2015; Chew & Jahari, 2014). Faulkner (2001) places tourism crises into two categories: natural and manmade crises. Tourism studies have examined a variety of natural crises ranging from hurricanes, flooding and tsunamis, and earthquakes to bushfires (Ritchie, Crofts, Zehrer, & Volsky, 2014). It was found that natural crises increase tourists’ perceptions of psychological risk and thus damage destination image (Huan et al., 2004).

Financial crises and security-related crises are the two most examined types of man-made crises in tourism literature (Li et al., 2010). Discussion of the impacts of financial crises on tourism has tended to have a geographical focus and has looked either at countries such as China (Li et al., 2010), Turkey (Okumus, Altınay, & Arasli, 2005), and the United Kingdom (Page, Song, & Wu, 2012), or at wider regions such as Asia (Song & Lin, 2010), Europe (Smeral, 2009), and North America (Ritchie, Amaya Molinar, & Frechtling, 2010).

Security-related crises form another discussion stream in tourism literature, with particular interests in terrorism (Bhattarai, Conway, & Shrestha, 2005; Sönmez et al., 1999), political instability (Bhattarai et al., 2005), and war (Mansfeld, 1999). A security-related tourism crisis can potentially cause serious damage to a destination’s image as it can ‘threaten the normal operation and conduct of tourism-related businesses, [and] damage a tourist destination’s overall reputation for safety, attractiveness, and comfort by negatively affecting visitors’ perceptions of that destination’ (Sönmez et al., 1999, p.13).

### 2.2. Crisis and revisit intention

Revisit intention as an important behavioural intention has been a key research topic in tourism literature. Revisit intention refers to the likelihood of a visitor repeating an activity or revisiting a destination (Baker & Crompton, 2000). Many tourism studies have focused on the antecedents of revisit intention in order to understand why tourists would like to revisit the same destination (Meleddu, Paci, & Pulina, 2015). Um, Chon, and Ro (2006) found that major factors influencing first-timers’ revisit intentions and repeaters’ intentions are different. They further pointed out that first-timers are influenced largely by previous destination performance, while repeaters’ intentions may be influenced largely by promotional activities which can recall their positive memories. The major antecedents of revisit intention identified by previous studies included: satisfaction (Jang & Feng, 2007); destination image (Chew & Jahari, 2014); perceived value (Petrick, Morais, & Norman, 2001); previous travel experience (Huang & Hsu, 2009); perceived risk (Çetinsöz & Ege, 2013; Chew & Jahari, 2014); motivation (Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2014); and, attachment (Petrick, 2004).

Recent studies have begun to focus more on the antecedents of revisit intention for different types of tourists. For example, Lee et al. (2014) identified three motivational factors influencing ecotourists’ revisit intentions including ‘ego-defensive function’, ‘utilitarian function-self-development’, and ‘utilitarian function-reward.’ However, this

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