

The secondary crisis communication of Occupy Central on Weibo: A response to Denis Tolkach

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ABSTRACT

This is a response to the rejoinder by Tolkach (2018) to Luo and Zhai's (2017) paper ("I will never go to Hong Kong again" How the secondary crisis communication of "Occupy Central" on Weibo shifted to a tourism boycott). The authors recognize Tolkach's suggestion on academic debates but hold different opinions to his arguments. Thus, further clarification is provided to Tolkach's two main concerns: the impact of Occupy Central on Hong Kong tourism and sentiment analysis of censored material. This response emphasizes that Luo and Zhai primarily discussed the secondary crisis communication and public emotions that arose in the Chinese social media over the events in Hong Kong, and not the events themselves. Additionally this rejoinder provides more information on Tourism between mainland China and Hong Kong, the environment of Chinese social media, and academic research progress in mainland China. It also advocates an "empathetic understanding" in cross-cultural academic dialogue.

In *Tourism Management* 67, Denis Tolkach (2018) had two major criticisms of our research on the secondary crisis communication of Occupy Central on Weibo (*Tourism Management*, 62, p. 159–172). First, that evidence that would confirm the negative impact of Occupy Central on Hong Kong's tourism industry remains unclear. Second, the results of sentiment analysis on Weibo could have been influenced by online censorship. In what follows, we reply to Tolkach's (2018) two arguments, as well as his criticism of the restricted freedom of academics in mainland China.

First, concerning the impact of Occupy Central on Hong Kong's tourism industry, Tolkach is relatively reasonable. However, our research focuses on online crisis communication—that is, public opinion as expressed on social media platforms. Based on the sentiment analysis of comments on Weibo over time, we found that the topic discussed shifted from the event of Occupy Central to regional and intergroup conflicts and finally gave rise to support for a tourism boycott as public emotion became increasingly negative. The shift in sentiments marked another social media crisis for Hong Kong as a tourism destination because public opinion toward Hong Kong, as expressed on Weibo, became radically negative, with comments such as "I will never go to Hong Kong." Our paper focused on online communication and behavior, but as stated, not the influence on actual behavior among tourists that Tolkach addresses. Indeed, in final discussion on limitations and

future research in our original article, we underscored the unexamined lack of correlation between online calls for boycotting tourism in Hong Kong and tourists' actual behavior.

Tolkach addresses the complexity of discerning the impact of Occupy Central and questions the impact on arrivals of mainland Chinese tourists (MCTs) to Hong Kong by citing month-over-month growth in visitor arrivals in 2013 and 2014. However, considering the trends from a broader time horizon, we found an obvious inflection point in 2014, which explains our use of yearly trends in our article. To prevent any confusion possible from using different data sources from mainland China and Hong Kong, we here cite data (Fig. 1) and content from Chen et al.'s (2018) research on Hong Kong residents' mentalities toward MCTs published in *Tourism Management*, data for which derive from the same source used by Tolkach, namely the publication of visitor statistics by the Hong Kong Tourism Board.

As Chen et al. (2018, p. 94–95) have observed, "MCT arrivals in 2015 declined for the first time in over a decade and the downward trend continued in 2016, thereby corroborating that the hostility of residents towards tourists could restrain tourism development because tourists are often reluctant to visit places when they do not feel welcome." Compared to the downward trend of MCTs' arrivals to Hong Kong, the number of MCTs to nearby countries or districts close to China (e.g., Thailand, Japan, South Korea,¹ and Taiwan) rose from

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¹ MCT's arrival to South Korea drastically declined in 2017 due to the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense crisis in South Korea (Korea Tourism Organization).

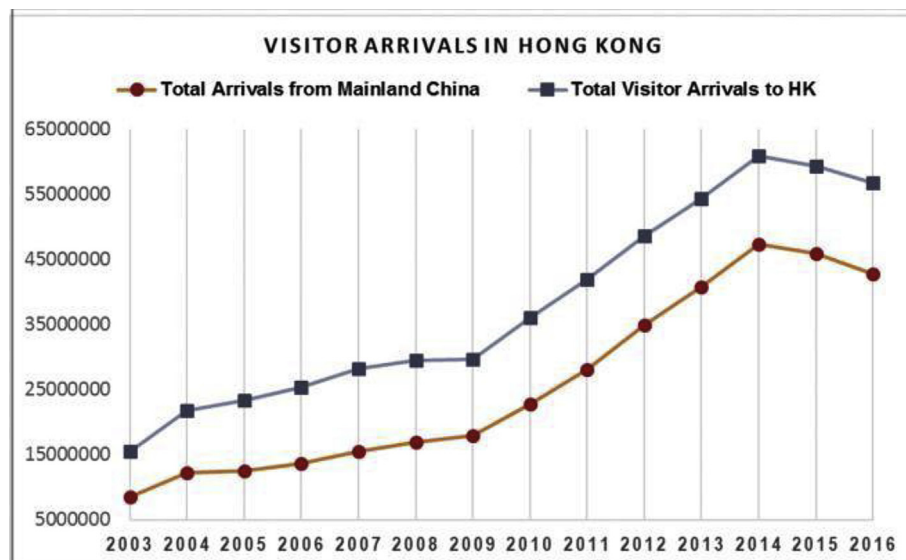


Fig. 1. Number of tourists from mainland China to Hong Kong (HK), 2003–2016, from [Chen, Hsu, and Li \(2018\)](#).

2015 to 2016 ([China Tourism Academy, 2016a, 2016b, 2017](#); [AP, 2015](#); [Jiang, 2014](#)). While admitting the scarcity of reports and academic studies on the substantial influence of Occupy Central, we nevertheless observed a sharp decrease in arrivals of MCTs in 2015 and 2016 based on horizontal and vertical comparisons over time and strong emotional confrontations as analyzed in research by [Chen et al. \(2018\)](#) and ourselves from different perspectives. We suggest that Tolkach's claim that “no immediate boycott of tourism by Mainland Chinese visitors” exists in light of monthly figures is questionable. We would note though that the appropriateness of using data representing mainland Chinese visitors to draw conclusions for MCTs is subject to various caveats. For example numerous businesspeople and parallel traders (水客) frequently travel between Hong Kong and mainland China, specifically to and from Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Dongguan, and Zhuhai, in a single day, and the possibility of their forgoing their commutes despite some restrictions remains slim (e.g., [Sun, 2016](#)). Accordingly, it would be more accurate to use overnight visitor arrival data to reflect MCTs, and the Hong Kong Tourism Board indeed provides total, overnight, and same-day visitor arrival data.

Tolkach adds that the number of MCT arrivals to Hong Kong eventually increased in 2017. We have also noticed that shift and thus initiated a tracking study. We recognize that 2018 is the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's return to China, that promotions of travel related to the event on mainstream and social media between mainland China and Hong Kong have become common, and that the trends will imply, (as they have already begun to indicate), another turning point in mainland Chinese sentiments about tourism in Hong Kong.

Second, Tolkach argues that our data and thus analysis could have been influenced by censorship on Weibo. To be exact, he writes, “[Luo and Zhai \(2017\)](#) suggest that after the protest started there was a growth in negative comments and the reduction of positive comments. This could be a result of censorship” (p. 309). We concede that discussions of Occupy Central on Weibo are under control, however, we mainly argued not about whether they are censored, but about how and why the issue discussed shifted from a political event into a tourism boycott. A secondary crisis communication on Weibo toward Hong Kong occurred regardless of whether comments were subject to censorship, and they spawned negative public sentiment on Weibo toward Hong Kong. They thus demand attention from the perspective of crisis management and place marketing. In response to Tolkach's point, we acknowledge that censorship on Weibo does occur and marks a political issue that extends far beyond the academic discussion in our article; however, we also again stress that a shift from crisis communication to

a communication crisis occurred that has tainted the image of Hong Kong as a tourist destination as well as coloring the sentiments of tourists. In a sense, Tolkach's argument that the negative emotional confrontations on Weibo could have resulted from government censorship is also problematic. Given that both mainland China and Hong Kong are parts of the People's Republic of China and that the sensitive topic of the “independence of Hong Kong” is intricately intertwined with other similar political issues that challenge Beijing's authority, the question arises as to why Beijing would purposely spark such antagonism within its sovereign territory by permitting only negative sentiments about tourism to Hong Kong online? A much more nuanced consideration of consequences, intended and unintended is required to fully understand the situation.

Other than Occupy Central, Tolkach proceeds to criticize the strict censorship of the entire online environment in mainland China. Referring to a BBC News article by [McDonnell \(2017\)](#), Tolkach suggests “that there is an increasing control by the Communist Party of China over what citizens are supposed to think, including what is allowed to be said online” (p. 309) and that the “appearance of some critical comments on Weibo does not mean liberalization of China, and reporting of local incidents that do not threaten central government may be useful to maintain control in the country” ([Sullivan, 2014](#)) (p. 309). Although we acknowledge that controls on online public opinion exist in mainland China, the effect of social media as a field of public opinion should not be denied or ignored. Besides Occupy Central, we have examined other tourism crises in mainland China, including the Qingdao prawns crisis (青岛“天价虾”事件) and the violent incident in Lijiang (丽江女游客被打事件), both of which demonstrated how tourists become empowered and fight for their rights when faced with injustice while traveling. Since the Qingdao prawns crisis of 2015, Weibo has often served as a forum for tourists to expose the violations of their rights. By analyzing secondary communication regarding the Qingdao prawns crisis on Weibo, we have discussed how tourists gain informational, psychological and social empowerment via social media ([Luo, Zhai, & Qiu, 2018](#)). Contrary to Tolkach's assertions, some opinions on Weibo have directly questioned the government's handling of situations—for example, “the sense of helplessness is the most terrifying when consumers' rights are violated while the management department did nothing.” Although such crises have damaged the images of tourist destinations, the bottom-up social force empowered by social media to some degree has promoted reform for more sustainable tourism management in mainland China. Clearly, the role that social media play in mainland China as a field of public opinion is undeniable; however, that

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