



# A shrinking world for tourists? Examining the changing role of distance factors in understanding destination choices

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the impacts of distance factors on Mainland Chinese tourists' international destination choices in 2007 and 2015 and how these factors' effects change over time. A random-coefficients conditional logit model was utilized to investigate three types of destination choices: past destination choice, dream destination choice, and intended destination choice. We identified different effects of distance factors on these different types of destination choices. Our results reveal substantial heterogeneity in the effect of cultural distance; in most cases, positive and negative effects of cultural distance co-occurred among Chinese residents. In comparing estimates from different years, we found diminishing effects of geographic distance on dream and intended destination choices. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

*Distance has the same effect on the mind as on the eye.*

— Samuel Johnson

## 1. Introduction

Tourists' destination choices comprise an essential component of travel decisions and have attracted much attention in the tourism field over previous decades (Barros, Butler, & Correia, 2008; Yang, Fik, & Zhang, 2013). Researchers have identified an array of factors influencing tourists' destination choices, including sociodemographic variables, psychographic factors, tripographic characteristics, marketing approaches, and destination attributes (Nicolau & Más, 2006; Um & Crompton, 1992; Woodside & Lysons, 1989). However, most studies on destination choice have been conducted on an ad-hoc basis, without evaluating how different factors change over time. In light of the world's rapidly shifting economic and social landscape, along with advances in modern technology, tourist behavior and travel patterns have undergone substantial changes. For example, the penetration of the Internet has fundamentally altered how tourists search for and acquire travel-related information (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). Moreover, tourism products continue to evolve to cater to tourists' changing tastes. Papatheodorou (2001) argued that many studies on tourism demand have failed to “account for the evolutionary features of the tourism product, namely the emergence of new destinations and the withering of others” (p. 165). Therefore, it is critically important to investigate

marketplace dynamics over time and to understand the changing factors informing tourists' destination choices. These findings will be particularly meaningful for destination marketers.

In the past, market dynamics were mainly studied using aggregated time series data in the form of international tourist flows (i.e., tourist arrivals and departures) (Crouch, 1994; Song & Wong, 2003). However, such research has suffered from several limitations. First, small sample sizes constitute a major problem in univariate time series analysis (Wang & Davidson, 2010). Second, international tourist flow data reported by national government agencies may include multiple tourist flows, such as those related to business, education, health, and visits to friends and relatives (UNWTO, 2016); hence, studies using international tourist flows may not accurately capture tourists' leisure-related destination choices. Third, macro-level studies on tourist flows have tended to focus on aggregated demand rather than individual behavior and do not indicate the effects of individual differences on destination choice (Wang & Davidson, 2010). Last but not least, micro-level research on destination choice generally only examines destination choice in a cross-sectional setting for a specific choice type (i.e., revealed or actual destination choice) without addressing intended destination choice in the future. Unlike previous research, the present study focuses on individuals' destination choice behavior relating to leisure travel using survey data from two time points. Three types of destination choices are considered: past, dream, and intended destination choices.

To fill the abovementioned research gaps, a random-coefficients

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conditional logit model (RC-CLM) was used to investigate three types of destination choices based on a nationwide telephone survey conducted in China in 2007 and 2015, respectively. The three types of destination choices were (1) past destination choice (i.e., respondents' previously visited international destination(s) over the last 3 years); (2) dream destination choice (i.e., destinations that respondents would be most eager to visit if they had the total freedom to do so); and (3) intended destination choice (i.e., choice of destination(s) in the next 2 years). In the proposed model, after controlling for other variables, we focused on two distance factors: geographic distance and cultural distance. By estimating the model at different time points, we managed to uncover the dynamics of these destination choices' determinants.

This study contributes to the current knowledge of international tourism demand in several ways. First, it utilizes survey data collected from the same population at two different points in time, which helps to highlight the influence of different factors affecting individuals' destination choice behavior over time. Second, this study incorporates past, dream, and intended destination choices and explores the relationship between these three destination choice types after controlling for other factors. The notion of dream destination choice has been largely overlooked in the scholarly literature but is particularly important in the tourism industry, as various popular media sources rate top dream destinations annually and shape travel trends among the general public. Finally, this research represents one of the few early attempts to investigate the influence of cultural distance using a rigorous discrete choice modeling format, which allows for the inclusion of multiple factors in a single model and clarifies the effect of cultural distance after controlling for other destination choice determinants. Unlike previous cultural distance research using discrete choice modeling (Yang, Liu, & Li, 2016; Zhang, Seo, & Lee, 2013), our proposed empirical model incorporates the individual heterogeneity of tourist behavior by allowing model coefficients to vary across individual tourists.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Destination choice

*Destination choice* refers to a tourist's selection of a destination from a set of alternatives under the influence of various internal and external factors, such as motivation and destination attributes (Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009). Destination choice is widely considered a sequential process involving awareness, evaluation, and final selection (Crompton, 1992; Decrop, 2010; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). In studying this decision-making process, two approaches are commonly used: (1) the behavioral approach (i.e., variance method), which evaluates multiple decision stages and various deterministic factors that influence one's final decision; and (2) the choice set approach (i.e., process narrative method), which focuses on a funnel-like, sequential process wherein the choice alternatives in tourists' awareness set are sorted and narrowed to a single choice (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005; Smallman & Moore, 2010). Moreover, based on the time frame in which a destination choice is made, the choice can be divided into past destinations (i.e., destinations tourists have visited already) and intended destinations (i.e., destinations tourists are planning to visit in the near future).

Most studies on destination choice have focused on either past or intended destination choice. According to Lam and Hsu (2006), past relevant behavior is the best predictor of future behavioral intention and future actual behavior. Many studies have used past visitation to predict future intention, yet findings remain inconclusive. On one hand, some studies have demonstrated that past visitation exerts a positive impact on future visit intention to the same destination (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Lam & Hsu, 2006; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998), presumably because people value consistency and wish to maintain behavioral persistency (Lam & Hsu, 2006). Woodside and Lysonski's (1989) model of traveler destination choice included previous destination experience as one of the traveler-related variables that influence destination awareness and

traveler destination preferences. On the other hand, some studies have reported that past experience negatively affects destination choice (i.e., tourists are more likely to choose to visit a destination they have not visited previously) (McKercher & Denizci Guillet, 2011), which may be explained by individuals' need for novelty and variety (Decrop, 2000). Lee and Tussyadiah (2012) suggested that tourists are likely to go to different tourist attractions or sites even when visiting a previously visited destination. Decrop (2000) categorized vacationers into brand loyalists and variety seekers according to the relationship between past and future destination choice: brand loyalists tend to visit the same destination repeatedly to seek an immersive vacation experience, whereas variety seekers go to other destinations to gain an extensive vacation experience. Therefore, past and intended destination choices should both be considered when examining whether and how tourists' past experiences influence their future travel decisions.

The notion of “dream destination” or “ideal destination” is frequently touted in the travel industry and related media (Gao & Zhang, 2009; Mak, 2008) but less so in academic research. Dream destination choice differs from past and intended destination choices in that dream destination choice is free of various constraints. Therefore, the present study defines a dream destination as one that tourists would most like to visit if they had the total freedom to do so. Dream destinations are self-identified by tourists based on destination characteristics and tourists' emotions. These destinations can be either destinations people have visited and enjoyed before or those that people have yet to visit but imagine as having ideal attributes (Gao & Zhang, 2009). Dream destination choice was considered in the model of destination choice set formation (Decrop, 2010), with such destinations found to represent a unique category in tourists' awareness choice sets (Decrop, 2010; Gao & Zhang, 2009). Litvin's (2006) empirical study revealed that although tourists tend to have adventurous ideal destinations in mind, they usually choose to visit more realistic destinations instead. However, choice set formation is a dynamic process, and a destination might shift in tourists' minds from a dream (i.e., seemingly completely out of reach) to an expectation (i.e., realistically available) to one of a final few destination options that are truly actionable (Decrop, 2010).

Although numerous studies have been conducted on tourists' destination choice behavior, there is a paucity of longitudinal research on the subject (Oppermann, 2000). Society is in a state of constant change; consequently, tourists' attitudes and behavior are shifting along with the changes of social and economic environment (Oppermann, 2000; Papatheodorou, 2001). To the best of the authors' knowledge, Wong, Law, and Zhao (2017) conducted the only longitudinal study assessing tourists' destination choices over time. They found that travel demand in the international market could be “volatile and dynamic” and may change across time. Such volatility in international travel demand over time results from changes in tourists' life cycle, demographic characteristics, and socioeconomic situational factors in the source market such as unemployment (Wong et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to track the evolution of destination choice and its contributing factors over time.

### 2.2. Distance factors

In destination choice modeling, the current study focuses on two distance factors—cultural distance and geographic distance—and explores how these factors influence international destination choice and the extent to which these influences change over time.

#### 2.2.1. Geographic distance

The geographic distance between a tourist's place of residence and a destination plays an important role in destination decision making. Most studies have found geographic distance to have a negative impact on destination choice (Nicolau & Más, 2006; Yang et al., 2013). This result is consistent with distance decay theory in economic geography, which states that peak demand occurs near a place of origin. Beyond

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