

## Social contact theory and attitude change through tourism: Researching Chinese visitors to North Korea

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on 34 interviews with Chinese visitors to North Korea, this paper adopts the social contact theory to examine their attitude change *through* tourism. The paper first examines how Chinese tourists imagine North Korea as a tourism destination prior to their visits. Then the paper focuses on both the *regulated* and *agentive* dimensions involved in their travel, asking how individual Chinese tourist *negotiates* with the externally imposed restrictions to obtain more tourist-host contact. Third, it identifies both positive and negative post-trip attitude changes. In doing so, the paper creates a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of tourism conducted between China and North Korea which are perceived as “friendly” neighbors with conflicts. Apart from offering empirical and policy implications, this paper extends the use of intergroup social contact theory by focusing on a destination with restrictions on tourist-host contact.

### 1. Introduction

In social psychology, “intergroup contact” has been considered one of the most important social psychosocial theories to examine relations among groups in the 20th century. The intergroup contact hypothesis was first proposed by Allport (1954) to examine the social contact between different racial or ethnic groups and their mutual hostilities in the United States. In tourism research, tourist-host social contact has been widely believed to play an important role in understanding intergroup relations, tourists' behaviors and tourists' attitudes towards a destination (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Lin, 2017). Therefore, it has been argued that intergroup contact approach should be used more often to study tourist-host social contact in tourism studies (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Lin, 2017; Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Tavitiyaman, 2017). Accordingly, some scholars have tried to explore tourist-host contact from different perspectives, including tourist typology (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Lin, 2017), cultural distance (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Lin, 2016; Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Tavitiyaman, 2017), host perceptions of tourism (Luo, Brown, & Huang, 2015; Sharpley, 2014), and tourist-host relations (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016; McKenna, 2016). However, over the past decade, apart from the studies done by Pizam, Uriely, and Reichel (2000) and Nyaupane, Teye, and Paris (2008), research that investigates the impacts of social contact on tourists' attitudes change towards the host has not increased much. Just as Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, and Tavitiyaman (2017) have pointed out, “[g]iven the importance of

social contact, tourist-host social contact, as a unique type of general social contact, is not receiving sufficient attention in tourism” (p. 257).

Tourism as an important method of social contact has played an essential role in promoting peace in the contemporary world (Kim & Prideaux, 2006; Kim, Prideaux, & Prideaux, 2007). Relevant research has been conducted, such as Israeli tourists visiting Egypt (Milman, Reichel, & Pizam, 1990), American students visiting the former Soviet Union (Pizam, Jafari, & Milman, 1991), Greek tourists visiting Turkey (Anastasopoulos, 1992) and so on. Yet, relatively few studies have been conducted to examine the role of social contact for tourists visiting “friendly” neighbors but with tension. One notable example is China and North Korea. On the one hand, “blood alliance” between the two countries has been created since the 1950s Korean war. On the other hand, North Korea's continuous nuclear tests have, to certain degrees, undermined the relationship between two nations during the past ten years (The Guardian, 2016). Moreover, the majority of previous studies have put the focus on tourists' attitudes towards hosts under the context of full contact with local residents, while rather fewer attempts have been made to study tourists' attitudes towards a country where there is tight governmental control of tourist-host social contact, and one such country is North Korea. Due to its unique political system, tourism in North Korea is significantly shaped and limited by stringently controlled itineraries (Wassler & Schuckert, 2017), such as restrictions on tourist-host social contact to ‘protect’ its citizens from the influence of the outside world (Kim, Timothy, & Han, 2007). In addition, most of the

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existing literature has focused on tourists' perceptions of North Korea after their visits (Li & Ryan, 2015; Li & Ryan, 2018; Li, Wen, & Ying, 2018; Wassler & Schuckert, 2017). Accordingly, there is a lack of understanding of tourists' attitudes towards North Korea prior to their visits.

In this regard, this study examines the impacts of social contact on Chinese tourists' attitudes towards North Korea and its people by answering the following three questions. The first is how Chinese tourists imagine North Korea as a tourism destination prior to their visits. Second, this paper focuses on both the *regulated* and *agentive* aspects embedded in their contacts, asking how individual Chinese tourist *negotiates* with the externally imposed limitations and regulations to obtain more contacts. Third, this paper addresses how their attitudes change after their visits. In doing so, the paper creates a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of tourism conducted between China and North Korea which are perceived as 'friendly' neighbors with conflicts. In this respect, the paper's focus on Chinese tourism to North Korea thus serves as an important empirical extension. More critically, this paper contributes to the literature on attitude change through tourism by extending the use of social contact theory.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Chinese tourists to North Korea

China has long been the largest tourist source for North Korea, accounting for about 95% of the market share (Crabtree, 2017). It has been suggested that China and North Korea are the two most intriguing "socialist" systems on the globe, and that there are many similarities between them (Chung & Choi, 2013). Specifically, China and North Korea "shared not only a common border, a long symbiotic historical relationship, a Confucian heritage, and a history of Japanese occupation, but also a communist/Marxist-Leninist ideology, a 'divided state syndrome', a history of fighting US and UN forces in the Korean War, a shared pariah status (at least for a time) in the international community, and a past refusal of diplomatic recognition by all but a few nations" (Moore, 2008, p.4).

Most of the studies regarding North Korean tourism put an emphasis on Chinese tourists and have been undertaken from the following perspectives: tourist motivation (Li & Ryan, 2015), the impact of the nuclear crisis on destination image (Li et al., 2018), shopping experience (Li & Ryan, 2018), tourist satisfaction (Li & Ryan, 2015) and revisit intention (Li et al., 2018). These research efforts have examined how North Korea is a highly regulated tourism destination with limitations on access, restrictions on contact with the local population, and a lack of individual mobility. On the one hand, the *regulated* side, as one of the most important destination images perceived by most tourists (Li et al., 2018), has made Chinese hold strong curiosities towards visiting North Korea (Li & Ryan, 2015). On the other hand, these restrictions, as one of the most dissatisfying factors (Li & Ryan, 2015), exert negative influences over Chinese tourists' travel experiences, such as shopping experience<sup>1</sup> (Li & Ryan, 2018) and revisit intention (Li et al., 2018). Therefore, it can be argued that Chinese visitors' unique perceptions of tourism in North Korea and more specifically their tourist-host contact as an important part of travel experience are significantly influenced and defined by these various kinds of restrictions.

### 2.2. Attitude change through tourism: The "intergroup social contact" perspective

"Attitude" as one of the most influential factors in making travel destination decisions has received significant scholarly attention

<sup>1</sup> For example, tourist souvenir shopping can only be undertaken at approved retail outlets (Li & Ryan, 2018).

(Bianchi, Pike, & Lings, 2014; Gardiner, King, & Grace, 2013). The majority of previous research regarding attitude in tourism tends to focus on the link between attitude and behavioral intentions such as motivation (Hsu, Cai, & Li, 2010; Prayag, Chen, & Del Chiappa, 2017), tourists' purchase intention (Rasty, Chou, & Feiz, 2013), and destination attachment (Prayag et al., 2017; Reitsamer, Brunner-Sperdin, & Stokburger-Sauer, 2016). At the same time, some scholars have started to use intergroup social contact theory to examine tourists' attitude change *through* tourism (Çelik, 2019a; Çelik, 2019b; Litvin, 2003; Ming, 2018; Paris, Nyaupane, & Teye, 2014; Pizam et al., 2000). For example, Litvin (2003) examines attitude change through tourism by comparing Singapore MBA students' attitudes towards Middle East countries and their people before and after travel. His research has demonstrated that in-depth tourism experience has a significant positive impact on tourists' attitudes towards their host countries.

The identified positive outcomes of attitude change through intergroup social contact include boosting mutual understanding (Litvin, 2003), enhancing empathy towards outgroups (Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009), improving intergroup relations by eliminating bias and stereotypes (Crisp & Turner, 2009; Dovidio, Love, Schellhaas, & Hewstone, 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), reducing negative emotions towards outgroups, such as anxiety (Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008) and distrust (Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2012). However, some authors challenged these above arguments regarding the impacts of the social contact (Chen, Lin, & Petrick, 2013; Paris et al., 2014; Pizam et al., 2000). They found that intergroup contact may also lead to negative changes in attitude, such as heightened tensions and stronger prejudice. According to Pettigrew and Tropp (2011), negative intergroup contact effects frequently occur in situations where the participants feel threatened and do not choose to have contact.

In addition to the outcomes of intergroup social contact, some scholars have also explored the quantity and quality of those contacts (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Lin, 2017; Pizam et al., 2000; Woosnam & Aleshinloye, 2013). It has been argued that there is a positive link between the frequency of tourist-host contact and the change in attitudes towards the destination (Pizam et al., 2000). It is worth noting that most existing studies have mainly targeted those destinations without restrictions on tourist-host contact while relatively less attention has been paid to focus on those places with restrictions on tourist freedom. One of such a typical destination is North Korea. There is no doubt that North Korea's restrictions on tourist freedom influence both the quantity and quality of tourist-host contact. One of the most important motivations of Chinese tourists to visit North Korea is to know the real situations of North Korea and have contacts with local residents (Li & Ryan, 2015), and therefore it is meaningful to explore how Chinese tourists feel about and negotiate with these restrictions on tourist-host contact in order to obtain more understanding towards the country and its people.

## 3. Research method

### 3.1. Data collection

This study aims to understand Chinese tourists' attitudes change towards North Korea based on their personal travel experience. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the method of in-depth semi-structured interview was employed to generate primary data. As no free independent travel is permitted in North Korea, all interviews were conducted in Dandong (China's largest border facing North Korea). Drawing on the first author's social networks, the data collection process received support from three Chinese travel agencies that operating group tours to North Korea. The first author was a Dandong resident from 1990 to 2012. While taking advantage of the role of "an insider" who have personally travelled to North Korea twice, the first author was also aware of and continuously reflecting on the role of researchers.

The three Chinese travel agencies mentioned above invited their

customers who paid the tour fee to participate in this study. Then those who agreed to be a part of the research were approached. Two section criteria were used to define the qualified participants. Firstly, in order to have a deeper understanding of this topic, the participants should be Chinese tourists who have stayed in North Korea for more than one day. Secondly, the participants should be the people who agreed to participate in the interviews both before and after their trips. The interview questions were designed based on the intergroup social contact theory. A set of open-ended questions were asked both before and after their trips. Pre-trip interview questions focused on understanding how Chinese tourists feel about North Korea and its people prior to a visit. After-trip interviews focused on exploring Chinese tourists' post-trip attitudes towards North Korea. In particular, after-trip interviewees were asked to share their feelings towards the restrictions imposed on them and whether and how they negotiate with their "regulated" trip to North Korea. They were encouraged to share detailed everyday stories and how they remember those defining moments during their stay in North Korea. Both pre-trip and after-trip interviewees were actively asked for further explanations and clarifications on certain points throughout the interviewing process (Qi, Smith, Yeoman, & Xie, 2017).

Each pre-trip interview lasted 10–15 min and each after-trip interview lasted 25–30 min. Altogether 34 interviews were conducted between May 1st to July 25th, 2017 (see Table 1 for the socio-demographic information of the participants). Data saturation was used to justify the sample size of this study based on the social contribution theory. As indicated by social construction theory, redundancy in comments tends to occur with approximately 15–25 respondents (Kelly, 1963; Pike, 2012). For this study, the last 8 interviewees did not provide any new ideas: therefore, data saturation was achieved after the

**Table 1**  
Profile of interview participants ( $N = 34$ ).

	N	%
Gender		
Male	20	58.8
Female	14	41.2
Age		
20–30	3	8.8
31–40	6	17.6
41–50	8	23.5
51–60	11	32.4
61–70	4	11.8
71–80	2	5.9
Education level		
No formal qualifications	7	20.6
High school or technical secondary school	10	29.4
University or college	12	35.3
Postgraduate	5	14.7
Employee type		
In full-time employment	16	47.1
Retired	13	38.2
Not in employment	3	8.8
In full-time education	2	5.9
Length of stay for the last trip (nights)		
2	5	14.7
3	22	64.7
4	7	20.6
Number of trips to North Korea		
Once	34	100.0
More than once	0	0.0
Residential provinces		
Beijing	7	20.6
Liaoning	5	14.7
Tianjin	5	14.7
Jilin	4	11.8
Heilongjiang	3	8.8
Shanghai	3	8.8
Sichuan	2	5.9
Zhejiang	2	5.9
Guangdong	2	5.9
Shandong	1	2.9

26th interview. Altogether 30 of the interviews were recorded with the verbal consent of participants. As four of the interviewees refused to take audio-recording, the first author took notes to record the content of these four interviews with their oral permissions.

### 3.2. Data analysis

The recordings and notes were transcribed into texts for further analysis. In order to ensure the high quality of data, Chinese transcripts were used for data analysis to avoid distorting information at the transcription stage. Content analysis was used to analyze the transcripts. According to Berg (2001), content analysis can be seen as a careful, detailed and systematic way to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings in social sciences. Following Luborsky's (1994) procedures, there were four stages of data analysis. The first was to get a sense of the whole text by repeatedly reading the transcripts. The transcripts were then manually coded into various themes and sub-themes based on a literature review as well as the frequency of meaningful units (King & Horrocks, 2010). While data was collected by the first author, the second author contributed to identifying major empirical themes and gradually developing a theoretical framework. Moreover, member checking was applied in this study to avoid falsified interpretations of the data to test the reliability and validity of this research (Cho & Trent, 2006). In order to confirm the final study findings, four informants were asked to check whether they agreed with the proposed findings, which they did. Finally, the findings and supporting quotations were then translated into English. To ensure the high quality of the translation, a Chinese-English linguist was recruited to minimize the possible inaccuracies of the translation.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Tourists' pre-visit attitudes towards North Korea

Not surprisingly, the majority of participants' attitudes towards North Korea before a visit are related to the country's political background. North Korea is seen as a "real socialist" country in Chinese tourists' eyes given its unique political and economic system. The expressions used by participants frequently to describe North Korea include "a unique economic development model", "self-reliance policy" and "military-first politics". The following are some examples of such responses:

Unlike other socialist countries in the world, North Korea is a real socialist country. As far as I know, private ownership is banned by the North Korean government. Everything belongs to the government. North Korean government controls over the means of production and distributes product to every family (Interviewee 4).

North Korea is a real socialist country in my eyes. Given the popularity of globalization, it still adopts a self-reliance policy. It tries to develop its country by itself. (North Korea's) military-first politics is also unique. China and the United States have reduced the cost of the military gradually; however, the largest source of income and product such as food and clothes still goes to the military in North Korea (Interviewee 2).

Indeed, some participants pointed out that their perceptions of North Korea's overall image are influenced and shaped by the country's special political and economic regimes. Firstly, considering the extremely important role of the Kim family in North Korea's society, the country has been characterized by a strong personality cult as to its leadership. Secondly, North Korea is also recognized as a poor, backward, and mysterious country due to its closed social environment and little contact with the outside world. Some interviewees stated that:

North Korea is a closed country in the contemporary world. I believed that North Korean people worship their country leaders crazily due to brainwashing education since they were born. I was shocked by one North Korean weightlifter who won the Olympic Games in 2012.

He argued that the power for winning this competition originates from its great country leader (Kim Il-sung). All of his achievements were given by him (Kim Il-sung). It sounded like a god to him (Interviewee 31).

As North Korea is one of the most closed countries in the world, it is very mysterious. There is no doubt that North Korea is a poor and backward country due to a lack of international trade (Interviewee 5).

Apart from the political and economic factors, some Chinese tourists' attitudes towards North Korea are based on their perceptions of the relationship between the two nations. Some Chinese tourists (particularly elderly ones) tended to make a comparison between today's North Korea and China in the 1960s or 1970s. In their eyes, "North Korea should be similar to China during the Cultural Revolution" (Interviewee 15). Furthermore, many respondents have viewed North Korea as China's friendly neighbor. Just to cite one example, a 78-year old man noted:

The friendship between China and North Korea is great. North Korea receives a large number of intentional aids from China every year. China is North Korea's most important partner. (Interviewee 25).

In addition, Chinese tourists expressed their attitudes towards North Korea as a tourism destination. First, many Chinese tourists believed that North Korea's natural environment is well preserved due to a lack of polluting heavy industry. Second, before the trip started, a set of strict restrictions on tourist freedom were informed by Chinese travel agencies. These restrictions are the major barriers for tourists in exploring the real situation of North Korea through tourist-host contact. Examples of such responses included:

North Korea is a very beautiful country in my mind. North Korean government really cared about its environmental protection. I expect to enjoy its beautiful natural scenery, such as clean water and blue sky (Interviewee 1).

In order to protect our safety, Chinese tour guides informed us of some rules and regulations when visiting North Korea prior to a visit. Basically, we were asked to follow the order of North Korean local tour guides. I was eager to explore the real life of North Korean people. However, the restrictions on tourist freedom may stop me from contacting them (Interviewee 7).

#### 4.2. The "situated" tourist-host contact

##### 4.2.1. The "regulated"

Many interviewees in this research shared their travel experiences in relation to restrictions on tourist-host contact. As knowing the real situation of North Korea drives Chinese tourists to visit North Korea, most Chinese tourists tend to take photos to record their travel experiences in North Korea. However, the North Korean government set restrictions on photo-taking for international tourists. Many interviewees stated that they take pictures with the permission of North Korean tour guides.

We took the train from Dandong to Pyongyang. Many of us tried to take photos to record North Korean people during this journey. However, the tour guides told us to stop taking pictures of North Korea rural villages and the people who are living in rural areas. One of the North Korean tour guides told us that city is beautiful in North Korean people's eyes. Therefore, they wanted us to take more pictures of Pyongyang and Pyongyang residents instead of rural villages and rural people (Interviewee 12).

The majority of participants felt that the North Korean government tried its best to cut off the connections between tourists and residents. According to their interview narratives, the actions taken by the government include isolated hotel locations, designated restaurants and shops for international tourists, and a separate train compartment for international tourists. The majority of Chinese tourists stayed Yanggakdo International Hotel which is North Korea's first luxury hotel in Pyongyang, the nation's capital. The hotel is located on an isolated Island. Tourists were not allowed to pass the permitted line of the

island. Interviewee 3 recalled that "[w]e stayed at the Yanggakdo International Hotel in Pyongyang. This hotel is located in an isolated Island that cut off the connections between visitors and the outside world, particularly Pyongyang local residents. North Korean tour guides told us that we are only allowed to walk within certain areas on the island for our safety concerns. If we pass the permitted line, we will be punished. That was a very serious warning".

In order to experience ordinary North Korean's people life, Chinese tourists were eager to go to restaurants and shops for local residents. However, they realized that they were only allowed to go to the designated restaurants and shops for international tourists during their visits. According to interviewee 20, "[o]ur trip was entirely controlled by North Korean travel agency. I thought of experiencing the lifestyle of North Korean people before my visit. However, we had meals in the designated restaurants only for us. We went shopping in designated shops only for us. I am pretty sure that these restaurants and shops are not available for local residents." At the same time, some participants pointed out that North Korean travel agency prepared a separate train compartment for Chinese tourists who travel from Dandong to Pyongyang. This action was utilized to prevent them from contacting North Korean people. The following narratives provide a more detailed description regarding these issues:

We took the train from Dandong to Pyongyang. The travel agency arranged a separate train compartment for our tour group. I checked the train and found that there are no North Korean people in our train compartment. I tried to go to another train compartment to contact North Korean people; however, a rude North Korean train conductor stopped my action (Interviewee 23).

The opportunities for us to contact North Korean residents were very limited. Our travel experience to visit Pyongyang Metro was very impressive. Waiting for experiencing the Pyongyang Metro was a big chance for us to contact North Korean residents. North Korean tour guides were also not allowed us to contact them. To be mentioned, they arranged us a separate train to separate us from local residents (Interviewee 32).

The findings show that tourist-host contacts are greatly regulated and constrained in the context of North Korea. However, facing all these restrictions on contacting North Korean people, some Chinese tourists still tried to look for methods to have more social contact and thus understand North Korea better. The following section will introduce how Chinese tourists exercise agency and negotiate with these restrictions to conduct more contacts.

##### 4.2.2. The "negotiated"

This study identifies two methods adopted by Chinese tourists to obtain more contacts. Firstly, they collected information from North Korean tour guides. Secondly, they actively engaged in observing North Korean local people during their travel.

**Information from North Korean tour guides.** As Chinese tourists were always accompanied by the North Korean tour guides during their trips, the majority of Chinese tourists argued that one of the most important ways for them to know North Korea is to have conversations with North Korean tour guides. Some of the interviewees said they tried to ask as many questions as possible related to North Korea, particularly regarding North Korean people's life. The following two narratives are examples in case:

I asked North Korean tour guides to introduce the basic information of North Korea to us. North Korean tour guides told us that everything in North Korea is owned by the country, i.e. the State. The government would build houses and allocate them to North Korean people. We were told that this represented a "people-centered policy". It is also one reason as to why we saw so many identically designed houses throughout the North Korean countryside (Interviewee 26).

I asked many questions related to the North Korean people's life. In summary, we were also told that every North Korean family has three electronic appliances, including refrigerator, DVD player and television

provided by the country. The guides also told us that medical care in North Korea is free, as is education and housing. They were very proud of it. We were also told that men above 18 years of age are allowed to get married. Equally women over the age of 17 years are also allowed to get married. I also asked the tour guide about the salaries of North Korean people. He answered that there is no current data about the salary of North Korean ordinary people. However, we were told that the living standards of North Koreans, in the 1980s and 1990s, were very high. Indeed, they were higher than China and South Korea at that time, but because the international situation for North Korea deteriorated after 1992, the subsequent economic development of North Korea had slowed (Interviewee 2).

During these conversations, the interviewees and the tour guides were very cautious and uses a quiet voice. Also, most participants expressed that they hold doubts towards many of the “facts” they had been told, for example, some of them said:

I doubted some facts provided by North Korean tour guides, such as North Korean people's living standards and the current situation of North Korea. They were trying their best to show the positive parts of North Korea to us. I believed that North Korea's real situation and North Korean people's real-life are worse than what was informed by North Korean tour guides (Interviewee 24).

I noticed that many Chinese tourists did not agree with North Korean tour guides. However, the conversations were whispered or conducted in low tones. I heard that one man spoke to his wife in low tones after visiting the Pyongyang Metro: “that (North Korean tour guides' words) is not true. North Korea could not build this Metro without the help of the Chinese army (Interviewee 30).

**Observing North Korean people.** In order to have a better understanding of North Korea, Chinese tourists also tried to observe North Korean people they encounter during the visit (e.g., waiters, North Korean local residents on streets, North Korean farmers and domestic visitors). They tended to make a judgment on the current situation of North Korea and its people's life based on observing North Korean people from many perspectives, such as their clothes, service, attitudes, and appearance. North Korean government tried to hide the “real” North Korea through cutting off the connections between local residents and international tourists. Chinese visitors knew that what they can observe only shows the best parts of North Korea. Even though, many participants consider their observation an important way to experience North Korea due to the strict restrictions on tourist-host contact. Examples of such responses included:

The majority of North Korean people wore uniforms on the streets. North Korean tour guides told us that the uniforms and shoes were distributed by the North Korean government based on their types of work. Their clothes look very poor and are not modern. North Korean people's life must be very hard (Interviewee 8).

All the North Korean waiters we met were very friendly to us. They were good-looking and polite. To my surprise, the majority of them can speak mandarin. They smiled at us when serving us. I was very satisfied with their service. I felt respected. North Korean tour guides told us that Chinese is a compulsory class for some North Korean middle school students (Interviewee 19).

North Korea is a very poor country. The majority of North Korean are very thin. I did not see any fat men on the streets. To my surprise, there are so many high-rise buildings in Pyongyang. I can feel that people's living standard in Pyongyang is much higher than in any other cities. I saw some North Korean farmers when taking the train from Dandong to Pyongyang. They looked very unhealthy and I can feel that they are starving (Interviewee 22).

I feel that North Korean people's mind is very traditional. They did not know what is happening outside North Korea. Here is a very impressive story. We met many North Korean people when we wait for visiting a museum. They all worn uniforms and waited for entering this museum. North Korean tour guides told us that they were organized by the government to visit this museum for educational meaning. Some

Chinese women in our tour group were discussing the old-style clothes of North Korean women. Few Chinese women dressed like that in our minds. We felt that they were also discussing our clothes. All Chinese women in our tour worn modern style clothes, such as t-shirts and short skirts. They were laughing at us. They may think that how women can dress like that. We did not understand their clothes and they did not understand us either. That is so funny and interesting (Interviewee 27).

#### 4.3. Tourists' after-visit attitudes towards North Korea

##### 4.3.1. Understanding North Korea

The majority of Chinese tourists argued that travel has enhanced their understanding of North Korea. Firstly, some Chinese tourists (particularly younger tourists) started to understand a bit more regarding why North Korean people worship their leaders after knowing more about North Korea and its people. For example, this opinion was supported by interviewee 31 who was shocked by a North Korean Olympic weightlifting champion.

I started to understand North Korean people's behaviors seen from TV, such as athletes crying after winning the competitions. This is because everyone was taught to love their country and leaders. The feeling for me is very strong in North Korea. We met many North Korean domestic visitors such as workers and students organized by factories and schools. They were arranged to visit the tourist attractions such as museums and country leaders' childhood homes for patriotic education. One of our North Korean tour guides told us that he was requested to visit these attractions for education at least once a year since 7 or 8 years old.

Secondly, some Chinese tourists said that, their attitudes towards the actions of the North Korean government, such as military-first policy and nuclear tests, are changed after their visit. Two interviewees shared that they started to understand these actions more after experiencing North Korea first hand.

I start to understand the North Korean government a bit more now. The real situation of North Korea is comparable to China during the Cultural Revolution period. Like China during the Cultural Revolution, North Korea is facing severe sanctions on international trade from western countries, especially the United States. The military-first policy is very necessary given these situations. Only strong military power can fight against the United States and protect its citizens (Interviewee 18).

North Korea's nuclear test in my eyes is kind of a crazy action prior to my visit. However, my idea has changed a little bit after the trip. North Korean tour guides told us that they would like to develop its economy like China. They thought that one of the most important reasons for China to develop its economy over several decades is to own nuclear weapons. Even I cannot agree with all of their words, it still makes some sense for me (Interviewee 16).

##### 4.3.2. Showing empathy for the Korean people

Many Chinese tourists showed their empathy for North Korean people after knowing their tough life situations. Firstly, the empathy was based on a comparison between their imaginations and the real situation of North Korean people. Chinese tourists pointed out that the quality of North Korean people's life is much lower than their expectations before their visit. They believed that North Korean people deserve a better life:

North Korean people's life quality is lower than my expectation. The life quality gap between rural residents and Pyongyang residents is super big. My feeling is so complicated after this trip. I feel bad for them and I think they deserve a better life (Interviewee 9).

North Korea is so out of date. The majority of North Korean people did not know what is happening outside North Korea due to a lack of internet connection. They cannot enjoy a modern lifestyle such as karaoke, bars, nightclubs and pop music. Their life is so boring. I really sympathize with them (Interviewee 17).

Secondly, the empathy was also based on a comparison between



North Korean people's life quality and the one of Chinese people. In their eyes, North Korean people's quality of life is much lower than Chinese people. The gap between the two nations generated a sense of empathy for North Korean people after their visit.

North Korea is a really poor country. We are mainly about how to eat healthier in China now. However, a large number of North Korean people are still starving now. Life for them can be tough. I feel sorry for them (Interviewee 14).

#### 4.3.3. Doubt and anger

As argued, some Chinese tourists developed strong doubts regarding the explanations and facts provided by the tour guides after the trip. What the North Korean tour guides told them were vastly different from what Chinese tourists believe. The differences made Chinese tourists feel that North Korean try to hide the facts and do not tell them the truth.

I thought that the North Korean government tries its best to show all the positive aspects of North Korea to us. That is the reason why North Korean tour guides did not tell us the real situations of North Korea, such as the economic development level and the life quality of North Korean people. (Interviewee 24).

Secondly, some Chinese tourists changed their opinions in terms of the friendly relationship between the two nations after their visit. It was found that some Chinese tourists were angry with some explanations provided by the North Korean tour guide, particularly were disappointed with the lack of acknowledgment regarding China's support when introducing the achievements made by North Korea.

I am so angry now. How can they ignore the support of China? It was impossible for North Korea to build the Pyongyang Metro without China's support. North Korean tour guides even did not mention a word related to China's support. I need to rethink the friendship between the two nations. (Interviewee 33).

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

Using semi-structured interviews, this study examines Chinese tourists' pre-visit and post-visit attitudes towards North Korea based on social contact theory. It shows that Chinese tourists' pre-visit attitudes towards North Korea can be divided into five categories, including the political system, economic situations, the relationship between China and North Korea, beautiful natural scenery, and strict restrictions on tourist freedom. Chinese tourists' pre-visit attitudes towards North Korea reflect North Korea's destination image in Chinese tourists' eyes. This finding is supported by Kim and Richardson (2003) who found that destination image has the power to confirm or reinforce existing tourists' attitudes towards a destination.

Drawing on the travel experiences of Chinese tourists, this study identifies specific restrictions on tourist-host contact in North Korea. Some restrictions were confirmed by previous studies, such as restrictions on photo-taking (Li & Ryan, 2015), an isolated hotel location (Li & Ryan, 2020), and designated shops for international tourists (Li & Ryan, 2018). However, some restrictions were not identified, such as designated restaurants for international tourists and a separate train compartment for tourists. These restrictions are used to cut off the connections between North Korean residents and Chinese tourists, which means the opportunities of tourist-host contact are very limited. While facing all these restrictions, some Chinese tourists still managed to negotiate with these restrictions and looked for opportunities to obtain more contacts during their travel. The existing literature has paid little attention to the methods of obtaining social contact when there are restrictions on tourist-host contact. This research has thus filled in this research gap, by identifying two important methods of social contact utilized by Chinese tourists visiting North Korea. The first method is obtaining information through conducting conversations with North Korean tour guides, and the second is observing North Korean people they encounter during the trip.

This study identifies three types of Chinese tourists' post-visit attitudes towards North Korea, including having more understanding of North Korea, showing empathy to North Korean people, and developing feelings of doubt and anger. The first two types of attitude changes identified by this research support the social contact theory. These two are positive outcomes of social contact: enhancing understanding of North Korea and showing empathy to North Korean people. It has been found that some Chinese tourists' attitudes towards North Korea changed from confusion to understanding after their visit. This finding is in accordance with what Litvin's (2003) work has demonstrated - intergroup social contact can nurture mutual understanding. The second positive attitude change is enhancing feelings of empathy towards outgroups, which is also supported by previous research (Vorauer & Sasaki's, 2009). According to the intergroup contact hypothesis formalized by Allport (1954), there are four conditions to ensure the positive outcomes of contact, including the equal status of the group members, common goods, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authority, law or custom. However, Allport's optimal contact conditions to ensure the decrease in prejudice were challenged by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) who conducted a meta-analysis that combined the results of all the intergroup social contact studies of the 20th century. The meta-analysis revealed that even Allport's conditions are not met, intergroup contact still enables to reduce prejudice. Therefore, even those optimal contact conditions are not all met in the context of Chinese tourists to North Korea, these two identified positive outcomes are still supported by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006).

The third type of attitude change identified in this research is some Chinese tourists developing feelings of doubt and anger after the visit. In this respect, this paper also challenges the social contact theory and supports the idea that not all intergroup contacts necessarily lead to a positive change in attitude (Chen et al., 2013; Pizam et al., 2000). In the context of this study, the North Korean tour guides' introduction sometimes leads to Chinese tourists' negative emotions, such as doubt and anger. Chinese tourists who were proud of Sino-North Korea friendship before the visit started to feel angry and disappointed with North Korea due to the ungrateful interpretations of North Korean tour guides. These negative emotions were also identified by Wassler & Schuckert, 2017 who examined tourists' lived travel experience to North Korea.

Critically, this study extends the use of social contact theory to a destination with restrictions on tourist-host contact. Previous studies have shown that the change in tourists' attitudes towards hosts and destination are positively influenced by the quantity of contact (Pizam et al., 2000) and quality of contact (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, & Lin, 2017). Given the restrictions on tourist-host contact in North Korea, the quantity of contact is limited, and the quality of contact is low in the context of Chinese tourists to North Korea. Nevertheless, as discussed above, both positive and negative attitudes change through tourism have been discovered within this study. One of the major functions of case study-based research is to identify variables that may be of importance for future research. In this instance, it can be argued that tourist-host contact in North Korea is characterized by the dimensions shown in Fig. 1. One of the most important Chinese tourists' pre-visit attitudes towards North Korea is related to its special political and economic regimes. Therefore, the majority of Chinese tourists had a general understanding of North Korea's restrictions on tourist freedom caused by North Korea's political system prior to their visits. In order to know the "real" North Korea, Chinese tourists exercised agency to negotiate with the restrictions to obtain more contacts during their visits, including obtaining information from North Korean tour guides and observing North Korean people. These special social contact methods shape Chinese tourists' unique travel experience in North Korea. As discussed above, the travel experience leads to both positive and negative changes in terms of tourists' post-visit attitudes towards North Korea.

The data generates two practical suggestions for managing Chinese

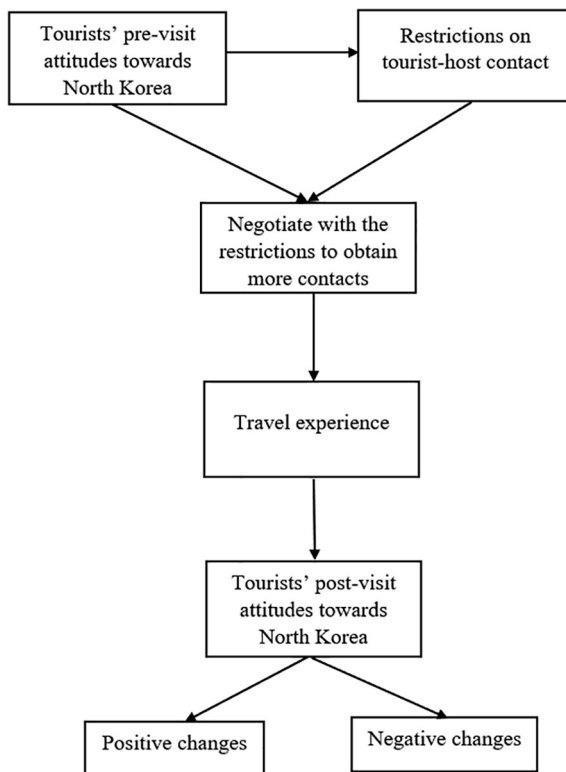


Fig. 1. Tourist-host contact in North Korea.

tourists in North Korea. Firstly, considering Chinese tourists' pre-visit attitudes towards North Korea mentioned earlier, slogans such as “exploring a real socialist country”, “experiencing past China” and “experiencing the world's most mysterious country” can be used to attract Chinese tourists to North Korea. In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the North Korean government has closed the border to foreign tourists since 23 January 2020 (Yong, 2020). Some media shared the news that the virus spread to North Korea around March 2020 (Business Insider, 2020; Park, Jong, & Jung, 2020), but the North Korean government has not confirmed any cases so far. This news and all kinds of relevant guesses make North Korea a more mysterious country in Chinese tourists' eyes. Knowing the real North Korea would become a motivation for Chinese tourists to visit this mysterious country after the travel ban. Secondly, the findings indicate that some Chinese tourists are dissatisfied with a lack of acknowledgement regarding Chinese government's help for constructing certain infrastructures, such as the Pyongyang Metro. As such, North Korean tour guides in the future may try to highlight the importance of China to North Korea when introducing some places that were built with the support of the Chinese government.

This study provides implications for future research. First, this study focuses on Chinese visitors to North Korea, therefore visitors from western countries can be given more attention in future research. Western visitors may have different attitudes towards North Korea's restrictions on social contact due to different cultural and political backgrounds. It will be interesting for scholars to explore the possible different travel experiences between Chinese visitors and western visitors. Second, this research is exploratory and thus does not fully delve into the nuances relating to socio-demographic variables and characteristics of different individual participants. For example, whether the age of Chinese tourists had a significant influence on their attitude change needs to be studied. At the same time, attitudes towards revisit can be influenced by travel motivations (Huang & Hsu, 2009), whether Chinese tourists' motivations have a significant influence on their attitude change in North Korea also demands further investigation.

Additionally, quantitative methods can be employed by researchers to better answer these research questions.

#### Authors' contribution

Fangxuan (Sam) Li: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Writing - original draft

Bingyu Wang: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Supervision; Validation; Writing - review & editing

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