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TOWARD CHINA–AFRICA TOURISM
IN THE CONTEXT OF A NEW ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT

This paper aims to characterize the theoretical and practical aspects of China–Africa tourism in order to help formulate policies for sustainable travel that benefits Africans while enabling Chinese to take a proactive role in changing the negative attitudes and practices, and to identify the implications of this engagement for western tour operators who see the China–Africa engagement as a threat to their own traditional interests. Both Kenya and Tanzania have now identified Asia as a growth area, in particular China (including Hong Kong and Macau), in line with the region's (and indeed much of Africa's) 'Go East' policy. This policy initiative offers new opportunities for tour operators in this Asia region. This paper thus explores the nature of this engagement, the mutual benefits it is likely to yield, and the associated challenges that currently hamper the industry. We outline the key theoretical developments pertinent to the China–Africa tourist phenomenon, outline our research methods, followed by an analysis and review of our empirical findings. The paper concludes with some insights on how this paper might contribute to further theory development and articulation of policy implications toward a better understanding of this emergent and important phenomenon.

Research background

Given the recent increased travel to Africa by Chinese tourists and traders, this paper characterizes the nature of this engagement particularly as the Asian presence is controversially viewed as jeopardising Africa's ecosystem and heritage for example due to the enhanced demand for ivory, thus raising important sustainability issues across the continent. We aim to characterize the theoretical and practical aspects of China–Africa tourism in order to help formulate policies for sustainable travel that benefits Africans while enabling Chinese to take a proactive role in changing the negative attitudes and practices, and to identify the implications of this engagement for western tour operators who see the China–Africa engagement as a threat to their own traditional interests. Recent statistics show that international tourism has recorded an annual above-average growth of more than 4% for the sixth consecutive years after the financial and economic crisis in 2010, representing a total of 1.2 billion of international tourist arrivals in 2015 according to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2016). China retains its leadership role as a source market of outbound travel, generating 120 million international tourists who

travelled overseas in 2015. Among them, 46.4 million of outbound international tourists travelled with organized package tour, an increase of 18.6% in 2015 as compared to the previous year (China National Tourism Administration, 2016).

Mainland Chinese are also regarded as heavy spenders, with a 2014 record of US$ 165 billion spent on travel overseas, followed by United States at US$111 billion (UNWTO, 2016). International relations scholars observed that the Chinese Government tends to demonstrate its "soft power" and achieve political aims by allowing/banning citizen travel to particular destination countries through a reciprocal Approved Destination Status (ADS) scheme (Chen & Duggan, 2016). China strives to be seen as a rising benign hegemony willing to help less-developed countries by encouraging outbound tourism to Africa (Tse, 2013). According to Travelbizmonitor (2011), 19 out of 140 countries granted ADS are African countries including South Africa, Kenya, Mauritius, Tanzania and Tunisia. Less popular destinations like Zimbabwe received only 6000 Chinese tourists in 2015, while 43,000 visited neighbouring Botswana, 65,000 Zambia and 158,000 South Africa, according to Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (as cited in Xinhua, 2016). The Kenya Tourism Board (KTB) reported it was expecting more than 100,000 tourist arrivals from Mainland China by 2016 (as cited in Huaxia, 2016). Only 4% of inbound tourists in Kenya arrived from China (including Hong Kong and Macau) in 2015 (Kenya Tourism Board, 2016), as the country relies on traditional sources in Europe (37%), Africa and Indian Ocean (26%) and the Americas (14%).

Hong Kong was ranked as Asia's 4th largest and the world's 15th largest source market in 2014 with expending on international travel recorded as US$22.1 billion (ITE, 2016). In 2015, outbound travel by Hong Kong travellers increased by 5.4% compared with the previous year. 89.1 million departures were made from a population of 7.2 million, averaging 12.4 times per person (Census and Statistics Department, 2016). Although regions such as Asia and the Americas have experienced remarkable growth in international tourist arrivals, Africa recorded negative growth of 3% in 2015 compared with the previous year, which accounts for only 5% (i.e. 53 million) of worldwide international tourist arrivals and 3% (US$1 billion) in tourism receipts in 2015. Incoming visitors from Asia only account for 3% of the total arrivals in the region, with South Africa remaining the most important destination, receiving 8.9 million of incoming visitors in 2015, albeit a 6.8% decrease compared to 2014 (UNWTO, 2015). In addition to large populations of wild game such as lions, cheetahs, leopards, and elephants in numerous game parks, pristine beaches and the world-famous wildebeest migration, the East African region's potential as a tourist destination remains unrealized, relative to destinations beyond Africa. We believe this region offers significant opportunities for Asian tourists and is ripe for further research. Following political turbulence in 2008, Kenya registered a remarkable rebound of international tourist arrivals in 2011,

surging 34% to a record of 1.26 million (Kenya Tourism Board [KTB], 2016), which earned the country approximately US$1 billion (Ringa, 2016). Yet, in recent years, the country has not benefitted from the booming tourism industry following terrorist attacks and outbound travel alerts issued by the major source markets in the West. Outbreaks of epidemics such as Ebola have also tended to threaten Africa's image as a safe travel destination, even in those countries that are unaffected, as tourists tend to lump African countries together as one region. However, research shows that the impact of epidemics can be contained with appropriate strategies (see for example Kuo, 2008); hence the Asian experience of SARS and swine flu for example has important lessons for the African tourist industry.

The African inter-dependence is further evidenced in the fact that any slump in tourist arrivals in Kenya exerts a negative impact on Tanzania because 30 to 40% of tourists visiting Tanzania come through Kenya (The East Africa, 2014). As with the rest of Africa, most of the visitors come from Europe and United States (WTTC, 2015). Both Kenya and Tanzania have now identified Asia as a growth area, in particular China (including Hong Kong and Macau), in line with the region's (and indeed much of Africa's) 'Go East' policy. This policy initiative offers new opportunities for tour operators in this Asia region. This paper thus seeks to characterize the nature of this engagement, the mutual benefits it is likely to yield, and the associated challenges that currently hamper the industry. In the sections that follow, we characterize the key theoretical developments pertinent to the China–Africa tourist phenomenon, outline our research methods, followed by an analysis and review of our empirical findings. We conclude with some insights on how this paper might contribute to further theory development and articulation of policy implications toward a better understanding of this emergent and important phenomenon.

Literature review

Much of the extant literature is silent on the Asia–Africa domain. Thus, we begin by characterizing the tourism debate pertinent to our discussion and identify how the gaps in the debate might be addressed. We then proceed to build on the nascent research on Africa (e.g. Sebele, 2010; Snyman, 2012) to offer a multi-disciplinary approach to the understanding of this phenomenon. Hence, we adopt a cross-disciplinary approach that considers the suitability of analytical lenses such as institutional theory, and post-colonial theory (Kamoche & Siebers, 2015). Locating the discourse within the context of the 'South-South' dialogue, this approach will hopefully lead to a China–Africa engagement underpinned by concerns about the social impact of tourism (e.g. Deery et al., 2012). First, we examine several critical strands in the literature. One important starting point is the destination choice model,

which categorizes destination from diverse perspectives, for example, socio-demographics (Guillet et al., 2011), elements of marketing mix (Fotis et al., 2012; Jacobsena & Munarb, 2012), distance decay on travel demand (Zillinger, 2005; Mckercher, 2008; Santeramo & Morelli, 2016), destination features and attributes (Dickman, 1996), tourist typology (Cohen, 1972), psychographic attributes of travelers (Plog, 1974, 1987, 1991, 2016), production-consumption of tourism activities (Dieke, 2013), tourism supply chains (Tapper, 2004; Dieke, 2013) and Crompton's (1979a,b) 'push-pull' factors of travel motivation. This diversity demonstrates not only the complexity of the field, but also the difficulty of arriving at a consistent model. A second important strand is distance decay which postulates an inverse relationship between tourism demand and distance from the source market; hence, the farther away from the Tourist Generating Region (TGR), intention to visit (demand) decreases exponentially (Zillinger, 2005). McKercher (2008) reveals that distance has a decaying effect on demand of international travel flows. There is a high demand for short haul destinations such as Thailand and Japan, while demand drops sharply for medium haul destinations that are between 2500 and 4500 miles away from Hong Kong such as India and Pakistan. Yet, travel demand rebounds for long haul destinations that are located 4501 miles and farther from Hong Kong which takes 6 to 12 hours of flying time (Mckercher, 2008). Nevertheless, for Hong Kong travellers, cities like London, Sydney and West coast of North American are more appealing than for example Middle East and Africa partly because Hong Kong people prefer urban travel than nature-based ones (Mckercher & Lew, 2003) and partly due to more aggressive marketing and destination branding strategies in developed countries (Cherif et al., 2014). This would suggest that factors relating to distance, and the scope andeffectiveness of marketing all impact the perceived attractiveness of the African travel destination. As to what specifically determines tourism demand, Crompton's (1979a) 'push-pull' motive model has been widely used to examine travel behaviours (Bashar & Abdallah, 2012; Correia & Pimpão, 2008). People travel because they are 'pushed' into making travel decisions by internal and psychological forces (e.g. prestige, escape and rest), and 'pulled' by the drawing power of the destination attributes (e.g. scenic beauty, trend and service quality). As Weaver & Lawton (2006) point out, it is more prudent for destinations to exert influence over 'pull' factors by developing favourable attributes and creating a welcoming environment to attract potential visitors (e.g. attraction, cultural links, services, affordability, stability and safety). These authors further cite infrastructural accessibility (e.g. availability and quality of transportation linkage) and political accessibility (e.g. visa and vaccination requirements) as major 'pull' generic factors. Dieke's (2013) sub-Saharan study which took an integrated production-consumption perspective also identified

accessibility, comfort and reliability of service vendors/products as factors that determine demand.

Tourist Destination Image (TDI) of a place, i.e. the perceived sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions of a place, varies from person to person (Gartner, 1986; Crompton, 1979b; Hunt, 1975). TDI plays an integral role in effective tourism development and destination marketing by establishing tourists' preferences over a particular destination and influencing their behaviour throughout the decision processes (Dieke, 2013; Lin et al., 2007). It compromises of three components: cognitive component derived from fact, evaluation or understanding of what is known about a destination; affective component about feelings toward a destination; and the conative, which refers to overt actions taken, e.g. a decision to visit within a certain time period (Ashworth & Goodall, 2014). TDI components are important antecedents of destination preferences but the level of importance of each measure depends on the destination type and tourist country of origin (Lin et al., 2007; Bonn et al., 2005). Western and non-western tourists differ over culture context, motivations, perceptions and practices (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). This suggests to us that extant research on the experience of western tourists in African destinations may have only limited relevance to the phenomenon of China–Africa travel. Hence, following (Baloglu et al., 2014), we highlight the need to identify significant destination attributes in the heterogeneous African markets and to adopt suitable marketing and product development strategies that enhance the destination image. Research shows that destination choice of first-time long haul travel is greatly influenced by destination image and brand value (Baloglu & Mccleary, 1999). We argue that marketing Africa to Chinese tourists is particularly challenging since long haul travel involves more resources, including time, money and effort (Mckercher, 2008), but also due to the potential risk of an unfavourable destination image.

In order to undertake effective planning, marketing and management, it is important to understand tourist typology and how intention to visit/revisit changes over time (Hvenegaard, 2002). Researchers have categorized tourists in various ways. An earlier example is Cohen (1972) who classifies tourists into four roles based on their attitude towards familiarity, novelty and institutionalized tourism, i.e. organized mass tourists, individual mass tourists, explorer and drifter. Each category has certain requirements with respect to the type of 'environmental bubble' they require in order to deal with the 'strangeness' in unfamiliar settings (Cohen, 1972, 1979). More recently, Plog (2016) has associated the popularity of a destination to the inherent personalities of travellers along a continuum, from 'venturer' (those who seek adventure and are more prone to choose new destinations) to 'authentic' (less willing to take risks, preferring familiar environments). Other studies focus on such factors as perceived attractiveness and how the destination satisfies tourists' needs (Popichit et al., 2013); potential in terms of attractions, accommodation,

accessibility, activities, and amenities (Dickman, 1996); tourist resources, culture and history, safety, etc., (Popichit et al., 2013; Kim & Prideaux, 2005).

Some authors claim that unlike western tourists, Asians and Africans do not seek 'authenticity' (Mkono, 2013; Shepherd, 2009), and that mainland Chinese tourists are driven by a quest for prestige, showing off superior social status and wealth, and the acquisition of foreign knowledge and experience (Arlt, 2006; Suntikul et al., 2016; Chen & Duggan, 2016). According to this viewpoint, Chinese tourists mostly value beautiful scenery, distinct cultures and value for money (Amonhaemanon & Amornhaymanon, 2015), and have a high propensity to travel in organized groups enjoying the companionship of friends and family (Tourism Review, 2014; Fu et al., 2012 as cited in Amonhaemanon & Amornhaymanon, 2015). We would argue that while travelling to less familiar destinations in Africa, this propensity for companionship will be even more marked.

Toward sustainable tourism

The importance of sustainable development is increasingly being recognized and its relevance acknowledged across industry including tourism. It is a multidisciplinary principal concern about how cumulative human impacts jeopardize human survival and the entire ecosystem (Pereira et al., 2010). Various definitions of sustainability and sustainable development have been offered in the recent two decades. The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987a) defined sustainable development as "a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with the future as well as present needs" (p.9). Researchers emphasize that sustainability "is about the interdependence of livingorganisms and communities (both human and nonhuman) over the long haul…. Each has an impact on and consequences for the others," (Paulette, 2010, p.1). Elkington's (1997) triple bottom line includes the economy, social equity and the environment, and is the most frequently used tool to measure sustainability (Wang & Lin, 2007). The most widely used definition highlights how sustainability "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987b).

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines sustainable tourism as follows: "Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support system." (UNWTO 1998, p.19). With the aforementioned definitions, UNESCO sets out four

central themes: 1) enhancing the well-being of communities; 2) supporting the protection of the natural and cultural environment; 3) recognizing product quality and tourist satisfaction and; 4) applying adaptive management and monitoring to ensure ecologically sustainability, economically viability and; ethical and social equitability (UNESCO, n.d.). An important aim of this paper is to establish the extent to which the emergent phenomenon of China–Africa travel can be said to be sustainable in the above terms and also in terms of ensuring that local businesses play an active role and do not suffer the form of marginalization that often results from highly vertically-integrated tourism supply chains.

It has been argued that tourism is a double-edged sword. The tourist-receiving region has most of the positive and negative impacts derived from tourism-related activities from economic, socio-cultural and environmental perspectives, but these influences also extend to tourist-generating region (Jenkins, 2015). Tourism generates revenue, creates job opportunities, provides motives and money for the preservation and conservation of the environment, and promotes cross-cultural understanding; however, the destination may also suffer from uncontrolled urban modernization and industrialization, social problems such as drugs and crime, nuisance to local residents and wildlife, environmental pollution, ecological disruption, negative geological impact, damage to archaeological and historic sites due to overuse/misuse (Holloway & Humphreys, 2012; Fortanier & Wijk, 2010; Weaver & Lawton, 2014; UNESCO, n.d.).

Broadly speaking, the present travel intention and tourist motivation studies can be divided into national and individual levels. National level studies mostly focus on how economic policies and sociodemographic characteristics influence tourism development (Pearce, 2016; Marzuki et al., 2016). Studies at the individual levelinclude ethnic and religious aspects, cuisine and key factors motivating tourists to travel to specified destinations (e.g. Bianchi & Miberg, 2016; Wong et al., 2016; Popichit et al., 2013). However, little is known about the perceptions and preferences from the travel intermediaries' perspective. According to Mckercher and Lew (2003), long haul and short haul travellers have different travel patterns. The former have a higher propensity to travel with organized package tours to visit multiple destinations within a longer duration. Tour operators who organize outbound package tours play a pivotal role and face particular challenges to exploit new destinations from long haul and less popular tourism areas. Given the importance of tour operators in travel destination marketing and development, understanding their key motivational forces and perceived constraints to organize tour groups is crucial, particularly as regards relatively neglected domains such as those in East Africa.

Relations between Africa and China (including Hong Kong and Macau) have been strengthening in the last decade as African countries pursue a 'go east' policy

and as Asian countries such as China target new markets in Africa. As China has signed bilateral agreements with 45 African countries and established Approved Destination Status (Information Office of the State Council, 2010), much of this engagement has been characterized by Chinese firms entering the African mining, construction, trade and manufacturing industries, and that has, unsurprisingly been the emphasis of most research on the subject (e.g. Kamoche & Siebers, 2015). This new engagement is now opening up opportunities for tourism and hospitality, yet so far there has been very little academic research on the subject. Thus, the main goal of this study is to examine the strategic, social-political and cultural dynamics of China–Africa travel with specific reference to the role of travel agents based in Asia (focusing initially on Hong Kong) in facilitating such travel. We propose to do so with reference to the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent are travel agents aware of the major attractions in East Africa (essentially Kenya and Tanzania) and what has been their experience if any, in venturing into this market?

RQ2: What are the factors that facilitate/impede these initiatives?

RQ3: How do current theories help unravel this phenomenon and what new theoretical insights might this study generate?

RQ4: What are the practical implications for East African Destination Management Organization (DMO) with regard to ensuring sustainable China–Africa travel?

Research methodology

This research adopts a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Beginning in March, 2017, the qualitative phase will involve in-depth interviews with 24 stakeholders: including 21 individuals from outbound tour operators/travel agencies and Africa-bound carrier(s) in Hong Kong, two officials from Hong Kong Association of Travel Agents (HATA) and one official from the Hong Kong Travel Industry Council (TIC) (n=24). The purpose is to capture the voices of various stakeholders and to identify any new statements or dimensions about motivators and barriers to organizing/selling package tours to East Africa for the purposes of the subsequent survey. Data will be transcribed verbatim and subject to content analysis. Theme-based method will be adopted to generate important destination attributes from tour operators' perspectives. For the second phase, scheduled for July–August 2017, a survey will be distributed to all 649 member companies under Hong Kong Association of Travel Agents (HATA) and Hong Kong Outbound Tour Operators' Association (OTOA), targeting 2 categories of respondent (n=1298): 1: manager/supervisor (e.g. executive, product development/sales & marketing/operations personnel or equivalent) and 2: customer

contact staff (e.g. travel consultant, tour desk agent, tour escort, tour guide or equivalent). We anticipate a response rate of 15% (approximately 200 valid questionnaires). According to the Travel Agent (Amendment) Ordinance 2002, any company intending to conduct business as a travel agency in Hong Kong is required to obtain a Travel Agent License (Travel Agents Registry, 2013). The Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC) membership is a statutory requirement for acquiring the Travel Agent License. A travel agent shall join at least one of the eight association members (e.g. HATA and OTOA) prior to joining the TIC according to his/her business nature and target markets. There are 1751 travel agencies in Hong Kong engaging inbound, outbound and local travel arrangements (TIC, 2017).

Data analysis

For the qualitative study, we will use inductive techniques, relying on the data reduction method which entails selecting, simplifying, abstracting and transforming data in the coded transcripts, via the use of NVivo if appropriate, thus ensuring that the internal validity of the study is strengthened (Yin, 1994). For the quantitative study, the questionnaires will be screened and filtered. Descriptive analysis will be used to provide a description of the data collected. This analysis will include frequency and percentages distribution for firmographic variables. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) will be employed to discover the underlying dimensions of the statements to develop the destination attributes.

Conclusions

This study will hopefully generate important insights into a phenomenon which is only now beginning to be acknowledged, albeit so far, only, in the media and non-academic literature. It is hoped that not only will this study map the terrain on China–Africa tourism, it will also critique current theory and generate new theory which will provide appropriate analytical lenses to investigate the phenomenon in question, as well as highlighting both practical and policy imperatives.

Acknowledgement

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