

# Research Horizons

*Highlights of Recent Research by the SHTM*

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## Travel Magazines Critical to Image Projection for DMOs

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Destination marketing organisations should pay careful attention to the ways in which Chinese travel magazines portray destination attributes and images according to the SHTM's Professor Cathy Hsu and a coauthor. In a recently published research article they show that these magazines are more likely to project images associated with leisure and culture than physical features, atmosphere or political environment.

Having analysed magazine content in relation to six outbound destinations, the researchers note that reporting on Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau portrays "many similar image attributes", whereas South Korea and Macau are given "distinct projected images". DMOs, they argue, should take note of the way destinations are portrayed in the media to ensure that the images "correspond to a destination's unique selling propositions". This will ultimately help to "promote the destination effectively".

### Creating a Destination Image

With the United Nations World Tourism Organization estimating that China will generate 100 million outbound travellers by 2020, understanding how and why tourists decide to visit a particular destination has become an important issue for DMOs. One of the most important factors influencing tourists' travel decisions is the image they have of a destination. The researchers explain that these images are composed of the "beliefs, ideas, impressions and expectations" that people develop through exposure to information sources such as the media, tourism offices, tour operators and travel agencies, and through personal experience.

Despite the increasing popularity of the Internet, travel magazines retain a "healthy readership" in China, according to the researchers. These magazines regularly report "information such as destination events, accommodation

and transportation", and the images they portray "play a significant role in forming tourists' perceived destination image". Yet little attention has been paid to their content "as an information source for travellers". With this in mind, the researchers set out to "explore the destination images of top Chinese outbound destinations projected by popular travel magazines in China" and examine the attributes associated with particular destinations.

### China's Most Popular Travel Magazines

The researchers selected 413 travel articles from six of the most popular travel magazines in China: *National Geographic Traveller*, *Traveling Scope*, *World Traveler*, *Travel and Leisure*, *Voyage* and *Traveler*. The articles related to six destinations, with Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam ranked as the top outbound destinations over the past few years and Taiwan having recently become a popular featured destination.

In analysing the articles the researchers first identified all of the words and expressions used to describe image attributes – for instance, "seafood, fish and shrimp" were all classified as the attribute "seafood". Through this process they identified attributes that could be categorised into the broad categories of natural resources; general infrastructure; tourist infrastructure; culture, history and art; tourist leisure and recreation; political and economic factors; natural environment; and atmosphere. They then examined the number of times each attribute was used in relation to each magazine and each destination to "identify trends and relationships".

Overall, "leisure and recreation" and "culture, history and art" were mentioned more frequently than the other image categories. Topics such as "cities, attractions, activities, shopping, cuisine, and snacks and food" received significant

coverage in relation to all six destinations, whereas reporting on areas such as the infrastructure, environment and political and economic factors was much less frequent. There were few mentions of the image attributes in the “atmosphere” category. The researchers report that destination atmosphere tended to be described in passing with adjectives such as “enjoyable, relaxing and family-oriented”, perhaps because it is more difficult to convey the atmosphere of a place than it is to report “facts and objects”.

### Coverage Focus

The magazines each focused on different destinations and attributes. Nevertheless, Japan was featured most frequently and associated with the most attributes in four of the six magazines. Vietnam and Hong Kong had the highest number of attributes in the other two magazines. Macau received the overall least amount of reporting and had the lowest number of image attributes.

The researchers suggest that the frequent reporting of Japan, which was the focus of nearly a third of the attributes they identified, might have occurred because marketing organisations “use travel magazines as one of their promotion channels”. Japan may simply have been “more aggressive in approaching Chinese travel magazine editors”. Although more Chinese tourists visit Hong Kong and Macau, the researchers suggest that travel magazines are less likely to focus on these familiar destinations because “more information is appreciated on popular foreign destinations”.

### Attributes Associated with Destinations

The researchers examined the top 20 destination attributes to determine how often they were mentioned in relation to each of the six destinations. Images of Japan, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Taiwan had many similarities. Articles on Japan, for instance, often mentioned food and sake, while hot springs were “highly recommended as a must-have experience”. Similarly, Taiwan was often recommended for its hot springs, snacks and food. Hong Kong was commonly described as a “shopping paradise” and many reports highlighted the city’s tourist infrastructure, such as its “many international brand hotels and different styles of restaurant”. Hotels also featured highly in articles on Vietnam, together with its “coffee and fusion cuisine”.

South Korea was portrayed more in terms of its culture and history, probably due to its strong cultural and historical ties with China. Snow was also mentioned frequently, reflecting the country’s popularity as a winter sports destination. Reports on Macau also gave the destination

a quite distinctive image, with extensive coverage of gambling and the city’s mega casino resorts.

### Projected Images Should be Assessed

The researchers’ findings will be useful in helping DMOs to “assess whether the projected image in travel magazines matches the image the destinations want to project”. For instance, hot springs are frequently mentioned in relation to Japan and Taiwan, so the researchers suggest that the Taiwan Tourism Bureau should first decide “whether hot springs are a product that it wishes to promote” and if so how it can “compete with Japan in offering this particular product”.

As tourism destinations “often promote different themes and events each year”, DMOs could check that the images portrayed in the media are up to date. For example, the researchers mention that South Korea has been “aggressively promoting its shopping and medical tourism”, but these activities were rarely mentioned in the travel magazines. Similarly, despite the considerable efforts by the Macau Tourism Office to promote the city’s cultural heritage, hotels and gambling still dominate travel reporting on Macau.

### Implications for Strategic Branding

According to the researchers, DMOs need to understand that different travel magazines focus on different markets and have different readerships. Only then will they be able to “decide whether to make efforts to be included in the magazines and the type of information to be supplied to each magazine”. A keener awareness of the images projected by competing destinations, they note, “could also provide strategic directions in destination branding”.

#### Points to Note

- Chinese travel magazines play an important role in forming travellers’ destination images.
- Reporting has focused on leisure, recreation, culture, history and art.
- The portrayal of a destination should match its unique selling proposition.
- DMOs can use travel magazines to help develop their marketing strategies.

Hsu, Cathy and Song, Hanqun. (2012) “Projected Images of Major Chinese Outbound Destinations”. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 17, No. 5, pp. 577-593.