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RESPONSE

‘Real’ and ‘normal’ North Korea: on the politics of shining light on the darkness. Reply to: ‘Shining light on the darkness. Placing tourists within North Korean tourism’

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In our letter to the editor, we posed the question whether international tourism to North Korea can be interpreted as a form of dark tourism (desiring the dark) with ‘a taste for the unusual’, paraphrasing recent mass-media accounts (Buda & Shim, 2015). John Connell, in his response to our letter, offers welcome engagement with our question, and, by extension, with debate over tourism to/in North Korea. Connell claims that tourists from ‘western’ countries, or at least the ‘small tour group of eight’ male university graduates he interviewed (2015, p. 3), travel to North Korea because they seek to discover a ‘normal’ or a ‘real’ North Korea.

Connell’s assertion seems, indeed, to be at variance with the one possible answer we proposed for our question. Based on our analysis of 20 articles from 12 magazines and newspapers, we proposed that tourism to North Korea was driven by an imaginative geography, both on the side of the tourists and of tourism industry representatives organizing these tours. Tourism companies rarely seek to offer a ‘real’ North Korea. Tourists seem to often want to discover *their* communist North Korea. For travel and tourism often involve tourists’ imaginations and projections of their own values, feelings and attitudes onto (unknown) places. In this vein, tourism cannot be separated from the tourists’ and tour guides’ construal of reality. This becomes more poignant in a communist country whereby such regimes are portrayed as secretive, dangerous and unique.

We indeed operate from ‘privileged’ academic positions at a university in a country considered economically developed and belonging to what is called the ‘western’ world, but ours can hardly be ‘a distant and detached perspective’ (Connell, 2015, p. 3). Dorina Buda is born and grew up in communist Romania of the 1980s and experienced first-hand ‘Westerners’ fascination for such regimes. David Shim’s parents were born in South Korea and he gained first-hand experience in the North while working in autumn 2008 as a food aid monitor for the UN World Food Programme. In this capacity, David, like other international staff members who were accompanied by a domestic counterpart, had special access to sites of the country that other foreign visitors including diplomats, business travellers and ‘ordinary’ tourists did not. During his assignments, David was similarly confronted with questions over discerning the ‘real’ from the ‘fake’, for

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instance, whether monitoring visits were orchestrated or not. However, the basic point to mention here is the rather trivial insight about the impossibility to find, know and represent the ‘authentic’ North Korea, even though when one escapes carefully choreographed itineraries.

Connell further opines that tourism to North Korea has no relationship with dark tourism. Indeed, travel to places of active or simmering sociopolitical troubles and conflicts seldom feature in academic debates on dark tourism, but these are nonetheless existent (Adams, 2001; Brin, 2006; Buda & McIntosh, 2013; Isaac & Ashworth, 2011; Joly, 2010; Warner, 1999).

In other respects, Connell’s argument seems to support our own. First, we all agree that people from China and South Korea represent the largest number of international tourists to North Korea, and this particular aspect should be given more attention in future research.

Second, the snippets of tourist interviews he provides seem to substantiate, dominant practices in (geo)political discourse which render North Korea an alien, distant and other place (e.g. ‘the only different place in the world’, ‘to penetrate further into the enigma’, ‘it was so bizarre’ (Connell, 2015, p. 4)). Such feelings of bizarreness, unusualness and desires to penetrate even further, enforce our proposition that some tourists are not deterred, but probably even enticed ‘wanting to see more, know more, to give it another try’ (Connell, 2015, p. 4) and decipher the enigma of such a bizarre place.

These tourists and, in a broader sense the travel agencies that Connell cites, purportedly sought to reveal ‘reality’ and ‘normality’. In this way, they reimagine North Korea as a place of difference, distance and otherness, hence, reinforcing hegemonic political discourses about the country (see also Shim, 2014); something which points to the politics of shining (a particular) light on the darkness. Foucault (1971) reminds us that the production of discourses ‘is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality’ (p. 8). Scrutinizing such discourses is not about revealing universal meanings, but it brings rarity to light as ‘the last resort of affirmation – certainly not any continuous outpouring of meaning, and certainly not any monarchy of the signifier’ (Foucault, 1971, p. 27).

Disclosure statement

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