From fighting against death to commemorating the dead at Tangshan Earthquake heritage sites

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From fighting against death to commemorating the dead at Tangshan Earthquake heritage sites

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ABSTRACT
While previous studies have emphasized the social construction aspect in man-made disasters, this study applies this framework to natural disasters. By focusing on three different commemorative heritage sites of the 1976 Great Tangshan Earthquake, constructed over the years in China, we argue that similar to man-made disasters, the construction of natural disaster dark heritage is also influenced by political, social and cultural factors. From fighting against death to celebrating life, the representations of death in dark heritage sites are always changing, particularly in transitional China, and tourism has played a role in this dynamic process. Some of the key features of natural disaster dark heritage sites are also discussed.

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KEYWORDS
Dark heritage sites; death; social construction; dark tourism; 1976 Tangshan Earthquake

Introduction
People have different experiences when they are alive, but death unites them. Being inescapable for every living being, death – in its circumstances and timing – remains hidden from them, frustrating their curiosity. There are many places which are closely related to death, such as sites of genocide, conflict and slavery, as well as defunct prisons (Dann & Seaton, 2001; Stone, 2006; Strange & Kempa, 2003), and such places are increasingly being awarded heritage status (Logan & Reeves, 2009) due to their dark histories (Biran, Poria, & Oren, 2011). As a result, dark heritage sites have become common tourist attractions (Beech, 2000; Cohen, 2011; Kidron, 2013). Seaton (1996) proposed that traveling to dark heritage sites is a travel dimension of thanatopsis, as such travel is motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death. Also, such travel helps the public learn more about death and reduces their fear of it, and helps them better understand the meaning of life (Stone, 2009). Dark tourism helps tourists mediate between the living and the dead and lets them contemplate the relationship between life and death by giving them an opportunity to ‘consume’ the death of other people (Stone, 2011; Stone, 2012; Walter, 2009). Further, dark heritage sites also serve as pilgrimage sites for victims’ families to visit, as for them, the death-related undercurrents are never fully removed from daily life (Cohen, 1992; Kidron, 2013; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Visiting dark sites, however, can trigger negative emotions such as fear, discomfort, sadness and depression.
(Austin, 2002) in different people because different cultural and social groups can have great differences in their views toward death (Stone, 2012).

Death can therefore be regarded as an important theme of dark heritage.

However, the things that can be regarded as historical and heritage death sites are often negotiable (Brett, 1996). For instance, man-made disaster heritage sites are more numerous than natural disaster heritage sites, and dark heritage battlefield and death camp sites are often explored and researched (Beech, 2000; Henderson, 2000; Lennon & Foley, 1999; Oren & Shani, 2012; Seaton, 1999; Slade, 2003). In addition, the establishment and interpretation of dark heritage sites often involve political agendas (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Mowatt & Chancellor, 2011; Muzaini, Teo, & Yeoh, 2007; Strange & Kempa, 2003; Wight & Lennon, 2007). Man-made dark heritage sites always present victims and perpetrators, and the key theme is to condemn the wrongdoing of the perpetrators. Further to this, studies of these sites mainly concentrate on revealing the political nature of the dark heritage (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Mowatt & Chancellor, 2011; Muzaini et al., 2007; Strange & Kempa, 2003; Wight & Lennon, 2007). At these sites, tourism also becomes a method of politically manipulated showcasing (Hollinshead, 1999). Regarding atrocity heritage, for example, Ashworth (1996, p. 4) noted that it is ‘both a highly marketable combination of education and enjoyment and a powerful instrument for the transference of political or social messages’.

In contrast, dark heritage sites resulting from natural disasters are under-represented and under-researched. Ryan and Kohli (2006) noted that there is a significant difference between natural and man-made disasters in that with natural disasters there are no clear perpetrators, and they therefore proposed separating them in academic research. Perhaps because of this, the studies on natural disaster dark heritage sites have not addressed any political issues, and are more interested in residents’ perceptions (Coats & Ferguson, 2013), reconstruction strategies (Huang & Min, 2002; Tsai & Chen, 2010; Yang, Wang, & Chen, 2011) and the motivations and experiences of consuming post-disaster destinations (Yan, Zhang, Zhang, Lu, & Guo, 2016).

However, as the meaning of death is highly constructed (Kamerman, 1988; Rowe, 1982), and that since the mass deaths caused in natural disasters are also societal events, we wish to explore what are the underlying processes and meanings of social construction given the circumstances of natural disasters. Deaths from war have often been used to maintain a sense of collectivity and shape national confidence, i.e. a political agenda (Kamerman, 1988; Qian, 2009; Seale, 1999), but is this still true in natural disaster dark heritage? Very few studies have addressed these issues with regard to natural disaster dark heritage, and here we attempt to bridge the gap.

In this study, the Great Tangshan Earthquake is examined in detail in order to understand the nature of the construction of death in dark heritage caused by natural disasters, as well as to understand the levels of similarity and differentiation between the designs of natural vs. man-made disaster commemorations. The Tangshan Earthquake occurred in 1976, and since then, the social, political and economic structures of China have undergone great changes. These changes are reflected in the construction of three memorial sites, and by examining the establishment of those sites, we seek to find whether natural dark heritage is socially and politically constructed, even though there is no obvious perpetrator to be blamed, and in what way it is different from dark heritage as a result of man-made disasters.


**Literature review**

**Construction of dark heritage sites**

The representation and interpretation of heritage is a process of creating multiple constructions of the past (Schouten, 1995). According to Graham (2002), heritage is considered a utilization of the past in modern times and for modern purposes, and its meaning is decided by present social, political and cultural circumstances. There are always multiple constructions of history (Crang, 1994), and as a result, there is always a political factor in heritage construction.

A dark heritage site provides a space to ‘write or rewrite the history of people’s lives and deaths, or to provide particular (political) interpretations of past events’ (Sharpley, 2009b, p. 8). Sharpley and Stone (2009) found that in some cases, the representation and commemoration of death or disaster may be far removed in reality from the original event. New information, knowledge and political and cultural context all influence the interpretation of dark heritage (Sharpley, 2009a).

Some studies have revealed that politics is the main factor influencing the representation of a dark heritage site. From his research on the dark heritage of genocide, battlefields, slavery and other themes, Sharpley (2009a) found that dark heritage is easily affected by mainstream ideology in imparting certain political implications. Many countries have created political viewpoints by commemorating wars or other violent or terroristic events (Williams, 2007), yet it has also been found that some destinations and cultural groups are reluctant to confront dissonant or inharmonious heritages (Dwork & Pelt, 1996; Lennon & Foley, 2000; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996).

In landscape research, it has been shown that the meaning of a landscape is created, recreated and contested in a social process (Mitchell, 2001) and that each landscape can be seen as a complex layering of meaning evolving over time (González-Vélez, 2008; Huff, 2008). Likewise, the establishment and interpretation of the meaning are not static and fixed but occur in a dynamic process. Seaton (2001) found that the representation of dark heritage is affected by the interaction of four interest groups, which are the owners and controllers, the subject groups, the host communities and the visitor groups. Poria (2001, 2007) paid attention to the attitudes (e.g. shame or pride) of the stakeholders (i.e. the four interest groups) to an event, as well as their involvement (active or passive) in it, and held that the reinterpretation of any dark heritage falls into this theoretical framework. Although dark heritage is affected mainly by the government (the owners and controllers), the presentation of dark heritage can also be driven by pressures from an audience and the intervention of external stakeholders. According to things such as tourists’ tastes, the victims’ families’ expectation, and market forces, dark histories may be altered and new narratives may be reshaped and redefined (Seaton, 1999; Sharpley, 2009a; Strange & Kempa, 2003; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996).

**The representation of death in dark heritage sites**

Although death is an important representational theme in dark heritage sites, the way death is presented and interpreted varies, and the influencing factors also vary. Walter (2009) noted that instead of death itself, it is a ‘death of some kind’ that is presented in
a dark heritage site. This is especially the case for sites of man-made disasters, where political agendas are found to be the most influential factor in the presentation and interpretation of death. The image of Robben Island, a notorious abandoned prison, was reshaped away from its former image of pain and suffering, highlighting a triumph of the new South Africa over repression and humiliation (Strange & Kempa, 2003). Wight and Lennon (2007) studied the selective interpretation of dark heritage sites in Lithuania and found that such sites are mainly used to commemorate the country’s miserable past and to show tourists the country’s national solidarity and determination against Soviet oppression. The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia indicates that the new government has less concern about the death site and the victims than about using the site to position themselves as liberators (Sion, 2014). These sites have constructed intended political agendas about the people, nation and history by making use of the theme of death. Another theme often presented is that of legends about heroes or national struggles, epics about success or failure or the extinction of a powerful civilization, which also shows a political purpose (Seaton, 1999).

Apart from the political agendas, dark heritage sites are also influenced by economic factors, and death can also be presented as entertainment. Early studies found that Alcatraz, for a long time considered a site of grief, is no longer simply seen as just a prison, and its presentation is overshadowed by commercial and entertainment interests (Strange & Kempa, 2003). As many tourists to Alcatraz now have been tutored by the Hollywood film *The Rock*, they want to authenticate that mediated representation (Gould, 2014). The killing fields of Cambodia’s Choeung Ek carry a shock value for tourists through the raw display of more than 5000 human skulls, and it is a source of profit whose beneficiaries are neither the victims’ relatives nor the survivors (Sion, 2014). In dark heritage sites, commercialization is often controversial. The emphasis of Bergen–Belsen, a former Nazi concentration camp, is to offer facilities for education and commemoration, with little thought given to tourist considerations, and it is against any ‘toning down’ or ‘sexing up’ of the exhibition to attract tourist (Schulze, 2014). Universal values is also a theme frequently represented in dark heritage sites. In Japan, for example, because of the number of deaths caused by the most destructive force ever unleashed on Earth, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial expresses hopes for world peace (Hryhorczuk, 2013). Similarly, many other dark heritage sites, such as Auschwitz–Birkenau and the Memorial of the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre, have become sites for international communities to pray for peace (Hryhorczuk, 2013; Zhang, Yang, Zheng, & Zhang, 2016).

These studies have revealed the complexity of representations of death in heritage and heritage tourism. Death is not as simple as an end of the biological body but has social, cultural and political implications. The representation and interpretation of death in dark heritage sites are influenced by social, cultural and political factors. In man-made disaster heritage sites, representations of death are often associated with victims and perpetrators, where the deaths represented are that of the victims, and the perpetrators are condemned. The memorials are intended to promote justice, to appeal for peace and to warn against wrongdoing, and the political implications are clearly shown. In the case of natural disaster dark heritage sites, there are no obvious perpetrators to be condemned, but how death is represented and interpreted in natural disaster dark heritage sites needs to be examined.
Methodology

Study site

The data collection site for this research was the city of Tangshan (Figure 1), which was chosen for three reasons. First, as dark tourism sites are multifaceted and diverse in nature, many scholars have suggested the need to identify the extent or ‘shades’ of darkness (Miles, 2002; Sharpley, 2005; Stone, 2006). The Great Tangshan Earthquake was one of the most terrible natural disasters of the twentieth century. Its epicenter was in Tangshan, a large city in eastern Hebei Province, China, which had a population of over 1 million before the disaster. It had highly developed industry and a dense downtown population (Chen, 1988). The earthquake hit the city at 3:42 a.m. on 28 July 1976, leaving a death toll of 242,769. Almost all the buildings within the 47 km² area around the epicenter were destroyed (Sheng, 1987). The Tangshan Earthquake was the biggest disaster in modern Chinese history and has been considered to be at ‘the darkest edges of the dark tourism spectrum’ (Stone, 2006, p. 157). Second, it happened right at the outset of China’s economic transition from a planned to a market economy, which brought pervasive political, social and cultural changes, and studying this period has the potential to demonstrate how natural disasters and death are constructed socially over time. Thirdly, as an industrial city, there had not been many tourist draws, and the earthquake sites were identified as new major attractions. In 1978, the local government formulated strategies to develop tourism to promote the new city of Tangshan (Tangshan Municipal Committee, 1978). In 1998, the local tourism bureau made special efforts to develop the earthquake sites as tourism products, and in 2011, the earthquake sites, together with the surrounding wetlands, were given a 4A attraction rating by the Chinese National Tourism Administration (CNTA), and approved by the CNTA as a Chinese Tourist City of Excellence. The earthquake publicity has contributed significantly to Tangshan’s urban tourism, and Tangshan’s case can help us to show the role of tourism in the transition to dark heritage and the construction of death.

Figure 1. The Location of Tangshan in China. Source: Map design by the author.
Three types of memorial site appeared after the earthquake in Tangshan. In 1986, 10 years after the disaster, the Tangshan Fight Against Earthquake Monument Square (henceforth, referred to as the first site) was built, and in 2008, the Tangshan Earthquake Ruins Memorial Park (henceforth referred to as the third site) was built. During the fieldwork, it was found that between those two dates, a commercial memorial wall (henceforth, referred to as the second site) and some personal memorial sites were built by private business sectors but later removed by the local government.

Currently, the two existing official sites commemorating this dark event in the city’s history have become must-see sites for tourists, and they can without any doubt be called dark heritage sites. The Tangshan Bureau of Tourism began to collect statistics on tourist numbers in 2010, and according to those statistics, in 2014 alone a total of 2,438,000 people visited the first site and 533,000 visited the third site (government statistics offered by the Tangshan Bureau of Tourism). Although the two sites are both important tourist attractions, there are many fewer visitors to the third site than the first one because the first site is located in the center of the city and was established in the 1980s, with the monument becoming a landmark in the city. It is well known among tourists and residents, whereas the third site was established much later and is located in a suburb where accessibility is not good, and therefore it is not as well-known among tourists.

**Data collection**

This study adopted a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews and observations, and the fieldwork consisted of two stages. The first stage included observations and interviews conducted from 20 July 20 to 29 July 2014, and the second stage mainly included interviews conducted from 30 September to 10 October 2014. The timing was chosen based on the following considerations. Firstly, the 28th of July is the anniversary of the Great Tangshan Earthquake, and timing the fieldwork around this date was helpful in order to observe the local memorial activities. Secondly, the first week of October is a national holiday in China, and as the number of tourists to Tangshan increases during that time, more diversified interview samples could be obtained.

In the first stage, non-participant observations were conducted around the day of the earthquake anniversary. In non-participant observation, ‘Simple observers follow the flow of events. Behavior and interaction continue as they would without the presence of a researcher, uninterrupted by intrusion’ (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 81). Observations were conducted at both the first and third sites as well as some areas in downtown Tangshan. Although observation is the least obtrusive of all social-science-gathering techniques, it also brings ethical issues about invasion of privacy. Adler and Adler (1998) concluded that invasion of privacy could take two forms: ‘venturing into private places, and misrepresenting oneself as a member’ (p. 101). In this study, the two dark sites have a lot of tourists as they are both famous landmarks in Tangshan, and the victims’ families are aware of this. Our observations took place in public settings where the authors tried to catch each type of memorial activity by the victims’ families and the local government. The field notes were recorded immediately by voice recorder and then transcribed afterward. Observation was possible because the authors stayed at a respectful distance from the victims’ families, and because there were thousands of other families and tourists on-site. These field notes were documented as field memos to embed the interviews into their particular contexts.
Interviewing is a powerful way to understand an individual or a group (Fontana & Frey, 1998) and was an important method for this study because interviewing involves interactions (Benney & Hughes, 1956), and the transition of a dark heritage site is a study of interaction. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with seven members of the earthquake victims’ families in order to learn their attitudes toward the sites and the forms of memorial activity over the previous 30 years, as well as their memorial activities over that time. Given that 38 years’ post-quake there existed the first generation (who personally experienced the quake), and the second and third generations (who were born after the quake and learned about the historical events from their parents or grandparents) in Tangshan, the different generations had different views about the quake memorials and deaths. The responding family members ranged in age from 26 to 73, and the first author’s 6-year experience living and teaching in Tangshan (2007–2013) helped the author gain access to the social world of these families. Each interview took between 60 and 90 minutes, either at the Tangshan Earthquake Ruins Memorial Park or the homes of the interviewees. As well, seven convenience-sampled tourists were interviewed (four at the first site and three at the third site) to learn more about their feelings and attitudes. These interviews laid the foundation for the interview outline in the next stage.

In the second stage, with the above-mentioned outline, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two officials of the Tangshan Bureau of Earthquake, two staff members and four tour guides with the Tangshan Fight Against Earthquake Monument Square, three staff members and four tour guides with the Tangshan Earthquake Ruins Memorial Park, and a retired professor specializing in earthquake sociology, each for 40–90 minutes (Table 1). These interviews were meant to help find the reasons for any changes to the memorial sites and the official attitude toward the sites. Twenty-one additional tourists were interviewed at the two sites. These tourists had all been to both sites, and thus their impressions of these two different dark heritage sites and their views about natural disasters and death could be compared. Each tourist was interviewed for 15–30 minutes. These one-on-one interviews were conducted in Mandarin, audio-recorded with permission and transcribed in full.

For this research, secondary sources, including government archives, newspapers and tourist guest books, were used to recap Tangshan’s commemoration of the earthquake. Documentation of government decisions and meetings relevant to the earthquake commemorations were photocopied from the Tangshan Municipal Archives so that the background and purpose of representation at the sites were made clear. These sites also include some that have since been destroyed (e.g. the commercial memorial wall and crossroad sites). For such sites, newspaper reports and media interviews were collected from the internet to learn more about the situation at that time. Also, comments written in tourist guest books at the two dark sites, as supplementary materials, were used to assess tourists’ perceptions and appraise the presentation of each site. The tourist guest books allow tourists to express their impressions, feelings, views and opinions about what has been presented to them (Zuo, Huang, & Liu, 2016). Tourist guest books at the two dark sites, with comments recorded from 5 June 2010 to 4 December 2013, were accessed with the permission of the respective management staff, and 43 reviews closely related to the exhibited content were chosen and photocopied for subsequent data analysis.
When the data collection was finished, the authors tried to get the main concepts and key information by reading the observational notes and transcripts of the interview recordings, and then all the materials were analyzed and qualitatively interpreted using thematic analysis. There are six phases of thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Firstly, the authors read and re-read the data to become immersed and intimately familiar with the content, and then noted down initial ideas. Secondly, as codes refer to ‘the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon’ (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63), we gave equal attention to each data item, coding manually by using highlighters to indicate potential patterns for later coding extracts, and then matched them with data extracts that demonstrated particular codes, and then collated them together within each code. Thirdly, we collated the codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Fourthly, we checked the candidate

### Data analysis

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### Table 1. Interviewee demographics (N = 22).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee number</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Length of work in the first site (years)</th>
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<th>Position</th>
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</table>
themes against the dataset to determine that they conveyed a convincing storyline of the data, and then refined these themes through combination and discard. The next step focused on each theme to develop a detailed analysis and decide on clear definitions and names for each theme. In this case, the authors found the following three themes from the dataset: recovery from the earthquake, the commercial commemoration of the earthquake and commemorating the lost lives and remembering the history. These three themes did not appear at the same time but at different sites. Such a thematic approach is built on the epistemological foundations of social constructionism (Hollinshead, 2004; Hollinshead & Jamal, 2007; Ryan & Collins, 2008; Ryan & Hall, 2001).

Social constructionism is a perspective that considers that reality is constructed through social processes; it has roots in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and phenomenology (Schutz, 1970). With the aid of Berger and Luckmann’s The social construction of reality (1966), this concept took hold. In social constructionist terms, taken-for-granted realities are produced from interactions among social agents (Hacking, 1999). Given its emphasis on social interaction, we use the perspective of social construction in this study to understand the role of the establishment and its influence on the design of the commemoration at a natural disaster heritage site. Through the examination of the process of how these sites are established, it can be revealed how political and social-cultural factors influence the social construction of natural disaster dark heritage sites.

**Dark heritage sites of the great Tangshan Earthquake**

**The first site: fight against the earthquake**

Although the earthquake occurred in 1976, in the same year there were also what could be referred to as several political earthquakes in China, including the deaths of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and the downfall of the Gang of Four. Because of these dramatic political events, the earthquake first did not receive much attention.

The government constructed a memorial building for the earthquake in 1986 on the tenth anniversary, and Hu Yaobang, then CPC (Communist Party of China) general secretary, gave it the name ‘Tangshan Fight Against Earthquake Monument’. The government explained the name: ‘a character “kang” (fight) was adopted to emphasize human efforts’ (Summary of Meetings of Earthquake Monument Planning Leading Group, scanned from the Tangshan Municipal Archives). The name shows the government’s attitude regarding the earthquake: to commemorate the fight against the earthquake rather than commemorate it as a natural disaster with disastrous consequences for hundreds of thousands of people. The disaster was considered an enemy to be defeated, and citizens were called on to participate in the earthquake relief as if they were fighting against an enemy.

The first site mainly consists of two edifices: the Tangshan Fight Against Earthquake Monument and the Tangshan Earthquake Relief Memorial Hall (Figure 2). The 30-meter-high monument is composed of four pillars, and the designer explained: ‘The hand-shaped tops of the monument are like four huge hands reaching for the sky, declaring that humans will conquer nature’ (Li, 1987, p. 41). An 866-word inscription on the secondary monument states that ‘The Communist Party is great, the socialist system is superior and the Chinese people are unyielding’ (official monument inscriptions). The Tangshan Earthquake Relief Memorial Hall houses an exhibition named ‘Tangshan Today – Exhibition
of Tangshan’s Development’. The exhibition puts an emphasis on showing the economic development and investment environment of Tangshan, as well as reshaping a positive image of Tangshan. Such emphasis can be seen in the official introduction at the hall: ‘To show reconstructed urban Tangshan and an outlook of the city’s future development, and to encourage all citizens to carry forward the lofty spirit in fighting against the earthquake to pursue better development and a harmonious city’ (from the guidebook given out at the Tangshan Earthquake Relief Memorial Hall).

The hall features 10 collections, but only 2 of them are themed on the 1976 earthquake and are, respectively, named ‘Disastrous Earthquake Shocking the World’, showing the earthquake damage, and ‘Heroic Spirit in Earthquake Relief’, which promotes the stories of some heroes in the earthquake relief. For example, how the hero Yulin Li endangered himself to rescue the Tangshan people is depicted. The others tell the history of Tangshan and about its post-earthquake development. From the design and exhibitions at the first site, it can be seen that government has focused on showing political power when facing a natural disaster, and mainly refers to the positive influence of the CPC and socialism in earthquake relief and post-earthquake economic development. In summary, the huge death toll of more than 240,000 and the trauma of the local citizens are understated, while the roles of the government and the CPC are highlighted as indispensable.

Staff members and tour guides’ perceptions. To see if the themes intended by the government were consistently kept in the running of the site, we interviewed staff members from the Tangshan Earthquake Relief Memorial Hall. One staff member (Interviewee No. 2, on 1 October 2014) thought that the hall was meant to make Tangshan known to the world: ‘Our Hall is a comprehensive exhibition of Tangshan.’ A tour guide for the Hall (Interviewee No. 15, on 2 October 2014) agreed that the function of the hall was to show Tangshan’s economic development: ‘To let more people know Tangshan, especially its development.’ At the first site, the theme of ‘carrying out fighting against-earthquake spirit and showing urban development’ has been recognized and strengthened consistently, from the site’s design to its naming, by the local government, staff members and tour guides. This theme has been institutionalized from the top down and reflected in the representations.
Victims’ families’ perceptions. ‘Victims’ families’ means those families which suffered the loss of family members in the earthquake, which comprises the majority of families in Tangshan. According to the interviews, the first site, whose construction was proposed by the local government, does not satisfy the need of the victims’ families to express the loss of their family members. From the observations on 28 July 2014, the earthquake anniversary, no relatives of the victims went to the first site for the memorial. One man, who lost his wife and three children in the earthquake (Interviewee No. 21, on July 29 2014), said that ‘the monument tells how people fight against the earthquake. What’s the relationship with us who lost family members in the disaster?’ Victims’ families did not go to the first site to show their loss because they believed that it was not relevant to their feelings about their lost family members.

Wang (2008) agreed with the view that the monument was built to commemorate the fight against the earthquake. Also, the monument commemorates the public event of the deaths of more than 240,000 people. Each victim is subsumed into a group, since no victims’ names have been inscribed on the monument. One victim’s family member (Interviewee No. 20, on July 28, 2014) complained that: ‘I cannot even see a name here, how can I find my family members?’ The first site turned the earthquake and deaths into something to be defeated, emphasizing victory, the future and moving forward, neglecting both the deaths and the individual lives.

Tourists’ perceptions. The first site does not satisfy the needs of tourists either. This is shown by the reviews in the tourist guestbook: ‘Too much praise of the CPC, but too little about the earthquake.’ ‘I cannot find what I want to see.’ (Tourist guestbook at the Tangshan Earthquake Relief Memorial Hall). These reviews are echoed in the interviews (Interviewee No. 2–4, on 1 October 2014): ‘I’d rather find more reflections about the earthquake, sorrows for the dead.’ Tourists wish to have more ‘vivid’ descriptions of the earthquake rather than too much about politics or economic development.

Seaton (2001) believed that ‘the market holds the permanent power to shape heritage and attraction development’ (p.124), so the question arises, do the tourists in this study case have such power? Their views, written into the guestbooks, were first replied to by staff members of the Hall. The tour guides (according to Interviewee No. 10, 2 October 2014) have adapted to the tourists’ requests: ‘We talk more about the earthquake because this is what they are most interested in.’ Although the staff understood the tourists’ needs, they did not tweak the exhibitions but instead asked the tour guides to offer more information about the earthquake.

The second site: commemoration vs. commercial opportunity

Burning joss paper at crossroads. Because the first site failed to satisfy the needs of the victims’ relatives, they began to choose crossroads at various points in the city at which to express the loss of their family members (Figure 3). It is a tradition in China to burn joss paper in front of tombs as ghost money for the dead, but none of the 240,000 dead from the earthquake has an individual tomb. Since the government-built monument at the first site could not satisfy the needs of the victims’ relatives, they began to burn joss paper at various crossroads (Wang, 2008). Because of the large number of earthquake victims and their concentration in the downtown area, such burning during the earthquake anniversary causes both the danger of fire and heavy air pollution. In contemporary
China, burning joss paper is considered a superstitious activity and is forbidden by many local governments, but such a commemorating activity has existed in Tangshan for a long time. One victim’s relative (Interviewee No. 21, on July 29, 2014) explained, ‘We can only express our missing of our family members at crossroads because we couldn’t find a proper place elsewhere.’ Burning joss paper was understood and allowed by the local government. An official of the Tangshan Bureau of Earthquake (Interviewee No.5, on October 7, 2014) admitted, ‘We cannot forbid the practice because it is a way of showing sorrow in this city for those who died in the earthquake.’ One victim’s relative (Interviewee No. 17, on July 28, 2014) complained that: ‘The dead should be buried in a tomb. But in this city, we don’t have such a place.’ They need a place where the names of their dead family members can be seen so that they can express their emotions there.

Commercial memorial wall. The unsatisfied needs of the victims’ families have also attracted business interests, and in 2001, a local private company built an earthquake memorial wall. By paying the company 1000 RMB, one could have the name of their family member carved onto the wall (Guo, 2006). This memorial was met by a lot of resistance and opposition, e.g.: ‘I have 22 family members died in the earthquake. As a worker, I can’t afford that much.’ ‘I think a memorial wall people have to pay for is an insult to those who died in the earthquake.’ ‘I would rather have names of my family members in my mind’ (Yuchen, 2006). Local media did several reports about the disputes; for example: ‘Paying for Carving a Name, Salt into the Wound?’, and ‘Immoral to Use Disaster as a Commercial Stunt’ (Shang, 2009). According to these reports, the media at that time were critical of the memorial wall. Generally speaking, both the victims’ families and the media thought that the commemoration of the earthquake should be non-profit and that it was immoral to pursue business interests through commercializing the disaster and those who died in it. The wall was eventually declared an illegal construction by the local government, and it was demolished in 2009.

Complaints and requests. Victims’ families and local scholars have expressed their wish for a place to commemorate the Great Tangshan Earthquake in different ways. An official of the
Tangshan Bureau of Earthquake (Interviewee No. 3, on October 4, 2014) mentioned, ‘There were letters to the Mayor of Tangshan, national leaders, suggesting to build a [memorial] place in Tangshan. There were also formal proposals submitted to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).’ Victims’ families, through their actions in direct or indirect ways, expressed their wishes and their dissatisfaction with the local authorities (i.e. the first site) and with business interests (i.e. the commercial memorial wall). In 2007, a proposal by a university professor to build another memorial spot, the Tangshan Earthquake Ruins Memorial Park, was included in a reference document (a copied government document offered by the interviewee) for government decision-making: ‘The idea that people’s interests should be sacrificed for particular political ones must be cleansed. The work of government should be people-oriented. Therefore, it is proposed that the Tangshan Earthquake Ruins Memorial Park should be built’ (Wang, 2007).

Finally, in response to these direct and indirect requests from the people, driven by market forces and the voices of local scholars, the government realized the need to create another official memorial, and in 2008, the Tangshan Earthquake Ruins Memorial Park was completed.

The third site: caring for life and recalling history

Located in a suburb of downtown Tangshan and covering an area of 400,000 m², the Tangshan Earthquake Ruins Memorial Park cost RMB 0.6 billion (approximately US$96 million). It was planned and funded by the Tangshan municipal government, and was completed and opened for free to both the victims’ families and tourists in July 2008. Over 3 million people had visited the park at the time of this writing, including many who came to mourn family members who died in the earthquake (Park Overview, 2014).

According to an official introduction, the park was built to ‘show awe for nature, care for life, explore science and recall history’ (Park Overview, 2014). The park features a memorial square, pool and walls, the Tangshan Earthquake Museum, and some earthquake ruins (Figure 4). A group of sculptures depicts how people survived and helped others, as well as the trauma the disaster caused them. The memorial walls consist of 13 blocks, on which the names of the 240,000 victims are carved. Each block of the wall is 7.28 m high, and 19.76 m away from the memorial pool. The figures remind people of the disaster’s date, 28 July 1976. The museum mainly exhibits scenes from the disaster, the trauma caused to people, the disaster relief, and the post-earthquake reconstruction. Each year since 2009, the park has had a government-organized public memorial service on 28 July. It can be seen from the name of the park and its design, buildings and functions that the government intends to show what happened in the earthquake and to commemorate individual victims.

Staff members and tour guides’ perceptions. An official from the Tangshan Bureau of Earthquake (Interviewee No. 5, on October 7, 2014) believed that the third site is ‘a spiritual home where people can recall their family members.’ A park staff member (Interviewee No. 6, on October 5, 2014) saw the place as somewhere ‘where people can express their emotions, find relief and commemorate those died in the disaster.’ A tour guide (Interviewee No. 12, on October 3, 2014) noted, ‘the place shows some living evidence and respect to those who died.’ It can be seen from the naming of the park, its design, and views of its staff members and guides that the theme ‘commemorating the victims
and recalling history’ was recognized and institutionalized top-down as a reaction to bottom-up pressures and revealed in the first site.

Victims’ families’ perceptions. Official statistics show that 80,000 people visited the park on 28 July 28 2014, the 38th anniversary of the earthquake (A Successful Completion of the Task of “7–28”, 2014). The authors observed a massive influx of victims’ families from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., who commemorated their lost family members in front of the memorial walls in different ways, including offering flowers, bowing, dusting the walls, gazing at names on the walls, and weeping and pouring out their emotions. The public memorial service organized by the local government began at 9 a.m. that day at the third site, where many local reporters came to report the service. No joss paper burning at crossroads was seen on that day. According to our interviews, victims’ families have taken the third site as a place for regular commemorations of the victims.

Tourists’ perceptions. The park has become a site for dark tourism. When asked about the difference between the first and third sites, a tourist (Interviewee No. 1–8, on October 4, 2014) replied that: ‘the square (the first site) did not impress me much after a quick visit, but I felt a much stronger shock and deeper impression on this site [i.e. the third site].’ Another tourist (Interviewee No. 1–4, on October 2, 2014) recognized the difference regarding themes: ‘One is political, while the other is civil, this place [the third site] is much better, and brings me the much deeper shock.’ From our interviews, tourists gave a better review of the third site than the first site. Also, the park causes tourist to reflect both on their current lives and on the relationship between life, humans and nature: ‘I hope the visit can bring a lesson for my kid. And this place makes us appreciate both human life and our present life…’ (Interviewee No. 1–4, on October 2, 2014); ‘It makes you a better man’ (Interviewee No. 2–13, on October 2, 2014); ‘We need to reflect on our attitude toward nature. It’s wrong to say the man will conquer nature. Man and nature need to be harmonious. A human cannot conquer nature’ (Interviewee No. 2–4, on October 4, 2014).
Discussion

There are several important insights we can obtain from this case. First, death in natural disasters has – beyond the natural, biological finality of human life – social, cultural, political, psychological and religious significance, similar to man-made disasters. Although the fact that death, as an inescapable ending, has never changed, the attitudes toward death are always changing, particularly in modern society. The establishment of the three sites reveals different underlying attitudes toward death. In Chinese traditional culture, death caused either by natural disasters or by nature can represent the powerlessness of humans against the forces of nature. Yet, in the Chinese Communist ideology, this pessimistic interpretation of humans and nature was hard to accept. The mainstream Chinese ideology at that time was to ‘fight against nature and develop our economy, our culture and construct our country’ (Mao, 1957, p. 1), and the slogan ‘human can conquer nature’ (‘Ren ding sheng tian’) was heavily promoted. While the fact remains that human beings cannot, after all, avoid death, a way to confront death is to ignore it and replace it with something else. Belittling death can be an alternative. Death should not be feared, and what matters is whether one should die for the group’s collective needs. This attitude is very much reflected in Mao’s teachings, such as ‘dying for the people’s interests is heavier than Mountain Tai’ (as cited in Mao, 1991, pp. 899–900). As a result, when a natural disaster occurs, and death is confronted, the way to continue this mentality is to avoid talking about death and pay less attention to it.

This attitude toward death also helps us to better understand the social aspects of natural disasters. Similar to Western countries, a disaster is a socially constructed event that is part of the social processes that characterize the society (Rodriguez & Barnshaw, 2006; Stallings, 2002). In Mexico, when disaster is constructed as a natural event, the risk to the vulnerable people is concealed, therefore inhibiting the emergence of socially sensitive responses at the policy level (Aragón-Durand, 2009). But there are differences in China. When confronting the earthquake disaster, kang zhen (fighting against the earthquake) was identified as the theme to continue the ‘battle’ between humans and nature, and by showing the achievements of disaster relief and restoration, the ultimate winner of the battle was still the humans, especially for Chinese under the leadership of the Communist Party. This is clearly shown in the first site.

However, fighting against nature and controlling death are not as acknowledged by the victims’ family members, who still hold a traditional Chinese view of death. The Chinese still believe that dead people have their spirits in heaven, and if they are well respected by the living, then they can protect those who remain. In the Maoist period, these traditional beliefs were forbidden but still secretly held. In memorializing death, it is the individual victims with their names and personal features that really matter. The families of the dead periodically have ceremonies for individuals who pass away, and activities include sending ‘ghost money’, clothes and other necessities to their loved ones, and wishing them a happy life in the next world. These rituals show that death is still both a mystery and an unavoidable event (Li, 2005).

Of course, businesses sometimes also see death as a source of profit. When the demands of the victims’ families for a memorial were perceived, the commodification of such a place was implemented, and thus the second site was set up. However, the pure commodification of this dark heritage site could not be accepted, especially in the eyes
of government institutions, which began to consider the importance of the city’s image in global society.

For the general public, residents or tourists are more concerned about the fates and experiences of individuals involved in the earthquake, whether the victims or their families. They like to relate the lives of victims and their families to their personal experiences and tend to reflect on the value and vulnerability of human life through their reflections on the disaster. Their attitudes are also different from those of the family members of the victims.

Secondly, although in dark heritage studies the role of the government in designing memorials is always emphasized, Seaton (2001) pointed out a dynamically changing relationship between the power and interests of different stakeholders in dark heritage representation. However, the dynamic changes in power structure are not much addressed in man-made disaster dark heritage sites. In the establishment of dark heritage memorials, governments play a dominant role (Sharpley, 2009a; Strange & Kempa, 2003; Walter, 2009; Wight & Lennon, 2007; Williams, 2007). Governments, representing the country and the victims, build memorials to disasters to condemn the perpetrators (Henderson, 2000; Sharpley, 2009a; Strange & Kempa, 2003; Williams, 2007). So, governments and the general public are often in the same position and have the same purpose in the establishment of memorials to man-made disasters.

However, this power relationship is more dynamic in natural disaster dark heritage sites, even in countries such as China, where the government has the dominant power. The different attitudes toward death associated with different interest groups demonstrate the political nature in the establishment and interpretation of dark heritage sites. In this process, the government still plays the key role, but since it is nature which connects the different stakeholders, and nature after all is one component of ‘us’, it is relatively easy for other stakeholders to negotiate and take part in the process.

Therefore, it can be seen that in the case of Tangshan, the relationship between the owner and controller group and the subject groups is changing (Figure 5). While the owners and controllers (i.e. the government) are dominant and the subject groups (i.e. the host communities) and the tourists are subordinate, these subordinate groups influence the development of dark heritage sites in a subtle and informal way. The family members showed their reluctance to acknowledge the official site by using crossroads

![Figure 5](image_url). Dynamic processes of dark heritage (re)construction. Source: A Modified Model Adapted from Seaton (2001).
to memorialize their loved ones, and the tourists also played a role by showing their expec-
tations via the guestbooks and tourist guides. These messages showed an effect when
tourism was gradually identified as an important nation-wide industry starting in the
late 1990s. The Tangshan earthquake, which was the most popular feature of the city,
was used in the city’s tourism industry, but although the private sector saw an opportunity
to initiate a memorial site, this commercial approach was not accepted, either politically or
culturally. The marketing of memorial sites also challenges governments and forces them
to be aware of demands from family members and tourists. These forces worked together
and made the government realize the need for the construction of a third site, and as a
result, the respect for individual values and feelings, together with the Chinese tradition
of memorializing death, was built into and represented by that third site in Tangshan.
According to other fieldwork we conducted at the 2008 Great Wenchuan Earthquake heri-
tage sites, there are some similarities between the two earthquake heritage sites. Each
victim’s name, gender and birthday were carved on a stone soon after the earthquake
in Wenchuan, showing that, like the third site in Tangshan, Wenchuan also shows
respect for the lives of every individual.

Still, the Tangshan government had some concerns about the development of dark
heritage tourism: ‘At that time, the local governments wanted to weaken the image of
the earthquake in the fear that this image can bring negative impacts on the general region-
ral development atmosphere. Therefore, earthquake-related tourism products were not
heavily promoted’ (Interviewee No. 23, tourism bureau officer, July 24, 2015). The visits
by the victims’ families and tourist groups to the third site to memorialize the earthquake
deaths thereby resulted in a positive response.

This study also shows that presenting death to visitors can cause feelings of unease,
thus supporting Zhang et al.’s (2016) argument that cultural constraints are also specific
tourism constraints within the Chinese cultural context: ‘The Chinese thanatopsis, …
claims that one will receive bad luck if one gets too close to burial ground’ (Zhang
et al., 2016). In this study, these uneasy feelings led to the avoidance of the presentation
of death and instead the presentation of more positive actions such as heroic behaviors
and fighting against death. Yet, as a tourist (Interviewee No. 2–7, on October 6, 2014)
noted, ‘When directly showed me the pain of 24,000 people’s death, I got the deeply
understanding of life.’ The pain (Rowe, 1982), anxiety (Moller, 1996), terror (Becker,
1973), etc. which are perceived negatively and thus avoided may result in us learning
more.

**Conclusion**

Modern China is characterized by its strict, centrally planned system, and that its mod-
ernization is being pushed from the top down. In this system, fighting against nature
and controlling nature are dominant themes and are heavily promoted. Individual life
is not considered important compared to the collective mission, and looking forward
and controlling the future is considered key. The first site was built in the wake of
the centrally planned economic period, and when the market system took effect and
control was loosened, traditional cultural factors and global culture also took effect,
which included mystifying death, accepting death, valuing one’s current life and
valuing individual lives.
Through examination of heritage tourism and the process of the establishment of three Great Tangshan Earthquake Heritage sites, this study illustrates some of the key features of natural disaster dark heritage sites. Natural disasters, the people who died in them and those still living are all embedded in the existing social system. Similar to man-made disaster dark heritage sites, the construction of natural dark heritage sites is also influenced by political, social and cultural factors. As a social force, tourism has played a role in Tangshan’s earthquake heritage interpretation (e.g. the tour guides adjusted the interpretation in order to provide more information about the earthquake) and the sites’ reconstruction (i.e. the third site). Further, dark heritage tourism provides an opportunity for tourists to understand death and life, because death is crucial for our understanding of life (Seale, 1999). However, it can be more complicated to reach an agreement on how to present and interpret death and natural disasters. Compared with man-made disasters, we feel that the power structure within nature heritage is more dynamic and the interpretation more negotiable. In this study, the conflicts among different groups regarding their attitudes toward nature and death can be influenced by traditional culture and globalization, and in the case of China, communist ideology.

This study also has some practical implications for the designers and managers of dark heritage sites. First, it is important to memorialize every single victim. Only in this way can the victims’ family members feel an emotional connection with those who died. Second, the designers should not avoid talking about death in dark heritage sites, as dark heritage tourism can provide a valuable experience for tourists to reflect on death. Lastly, considering the fact that the world is facing natural disasters on an unprecedented scale today (Guha-Sapir, Hargitt, & Hoyois, 2004), for managers of dark tourism sites, especially for dark tourism sites commemorating natural disasters, how to view the relationship between people and the environment is important, and how to attain a balance between ‘fighting against’ natural disasters and acquiescing to nature is a challenge.

This study is not free of limitations. The first limitation lies in that our case study is a dark heritage site in China, which is a country with powerful political and ideological influences. Future research should consider exploring the social construction of natural disaster dark heritage sites in Western countries in order to establish an ideal generalizability. Second, while this study has focused on an earthquake disaster, future research that focuses on other types of natural disasters may provide a further understanding of the representations of death in natural disaster dark heritage sites.

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