ANNALS
of Tourism Research
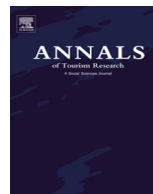
Politics and tourism promotion: Hong Kong's myth making

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

By using "crisis of identity" as background, this study analyses how post-colonial Hong Kong relies on myths that are grounded in its complex, centuries-old socio-cultural political heritage to convey through tourism an identity different and separate from that of China. This qualitative inquiry, which relies on both online and printed promotional documents reinforced by primary data collected through in-depth interviews, proposes an explanation of the symbolic representation of tourism through four sequential myths. The article concludes that Hong Kong exploits its colonial past to create an identity that enhances its "local Chineseness" with a Western flavor and positions the territory to assume an increasingly hybrid identity to avoid being just another Chinese city.

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Introduction

In the period leading up to the Handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC) on July 1, 1997, *The Pearl of Orient* was the most popular song broadcast throughout Mainland China. The lyrics conveyed the patriotic notion that Hong Kong was about to return to its "biological" mother after "too many years under its British 'stepmother.'" Eighteen years later, the process of nation

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building between Hong Kong and China remains a work in progress at various levels (Ip, 2012). Hong Kong's status as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) and its "one country, two systems" arrangement have supported calls that it functions as a largely independent city-state within a broader China. However, recurrent rhetoric suggests that Hong Kong could become just another Chinese city (Fong, 2010) and highlights what Ip (2012) calls a continuing quest for a "Hong Kong identity."

At the center of this identity crisis lies the issue of whether Hong Kong is Chinese or international (Fong, 2010). Chun (1996a, p. 65) not only predicted that Hong Kong would "search for its 'identity'" in the years after the Handover but also ascribed the "…total absence of a shared identity among the Chinese there" to a combination of complex historical factors culminating in a crisis of cultural ambiguity and ambivalence precipitated by Britain's decision in 1984 to return Hong Kong to China in 1997. Today, while Hong Kong residents are part of the broader political geography of China, they continue to resist attempts to foster closer cultural and social assimilation with the PRC (Fung, 2001).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the SAR's English and Chinese tourism promotion activities, where references to China are almost non-existent. Its current slogan, "Hong Kong - Asia's World City," specifically dissociates the city from China. The Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) continues to rely heavily on Hong Kong's myths, while paying scant attention to similar Mainland Chinese national myths. Such actions may reflect strategic marketing decisions aimed at positioning Hong Kong uniquely in the global marketplace. However, the external rhetoric and representation that distinguish Hong Kong could be more political and historical in nature and inextricably tied to a broader post-colonial resistance to social and cultural assimilation. While the Central government hoped the "return to the motherland" should have been seamless, recent surveys suggest residents' identification with a distinct Hong Kong society has increased since the Handover (Veg, 2013), especially among young people.

Using Hou's (2012) examination of the symbolic authority of tourism as a constitutive exteriorization of China as a springboard, this paper focuses on the process at work in Hong Kong. It provides fresh empirical evidence from the operational practice of tourism to support Chun's (1996a) claims that the identity crisis in Hong Kong's public arena is due to fractured tactical co-options by interests such as the tourism sector. This approach is justified based on the fact that the performative authority of tourism and collaborative sectors (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998), in their signification of Hong Kong, explicitly acknowledge the city's historical complexity. In other words, this paper highlights the intersection of the ideological power and political authority of tourism (Hollinshead, 2009) through a critical investigation of how Hong Kong signifies itself as a destination. To that end, the study delves into practices of myths as agency and appropriation in the manipulation of the symbolic image of place (McKay, 1994).

Myths, identity and tourism

Lévi-Strauss (1955) relied on historical concepts to define myths as processes of dialectic synthesis of oppositions such that myths are both historical and ahistorical. Myths also vary, as they are affected by environmental changes brought about by increasingly mobile cultures. Because their purpose is to address paradoxes of human ambivalence, myths effectively reconcile history with politics. Connor (1994) argues that nations are themselves myths and that the essence of a nation is its intangibility or subjectivity, or as Anderson (1991) suggests, an "imagined political community." The "imagined place" relies on myths that are both diachronic (changing through time) and synchronic (transcending time) (Lévi-Strauss, 1978).

In his study of the role of government advertising in developing national symbols and myths to shape the conversation about citizenship in Canada, Rose (2003) suggests that all nations have extensive genealogies to create community and bind their citizens. How real or imagined the effects of these stories are depends on the symbolic and metaphorical meanings associated with them (Bowman, 1996). In proposing Shangri-la as a phantasmal destination, Gao, Zhang and L'Espoir Decosta (2012) claim that tourists' meanings attached to the creation of imaginative space are derived from preconceptions and impressions from myths. This study demonstrates the power of the symbolic meaning of myths in positioning Hong Kong as different from China. Myth-making in this instance plays a vital