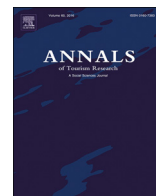


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Politics of memories: Identity construction in museums

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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts collective memory theory to reveal processes through which heritage tourism stakeholders (re)construct contested national identity. Theoretically sensitised to identity crisis, the study analyses how Hong Kong and Macao heritage managers utilise complex transnational memories to (re)construct an identity aligned with, yet distinct from, that of China. Through a critical discourse analysis of interviews and discursive exhibition and museum texts, the article reveals that museum managers formulate heritage imaginings and a sense of belonging(s) through defining the collective memory for “Self” and “Other”. The article concludes that, by collective memory-building, museum professionals make tangible statements of national identities through legitimating negotiations and resistance in heritage tourism discourse. Implications for heritage tourism studies and museum management are also discussed.

Introduction

Heritage production, (re)presentation and consumption are closely connected to place promotion power relations, whilst identity (re)construction is often seen as a negotiation between dynamic and contested heritage discourses (d’Hauteserre, 2011; Light, 2001; Morgan, 2004; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Zhang, L’Espoir Decosta, & McKercher, 2015). An in-depth understanding of such processes requires critical considerations of the ways in which heritage legitimates national identity through manipulations of what to remember and what to forget (Bell, 2003; Smith, 1991). As heritage attractions, museums act as memory institutions, connecting valued objects to “official” national discourses (Crane, 1997). Yet despite such historical objects (and sites) being embodiments of collective memory for identity construction, memory studies are still at a developmental stage in tourism, although scholars have explored how tourism engages and perpetuates significant historical moments through image-building or memory-making (d’Hauteserre, 2011; Marschall, 2012; Park, 2010, 2011; Winter, 2009).

While recognising museums as material testimonies of national identity, tourism studies have largely deployed descriptive/ethnographic approaches to interpreting the meanings of museums as constructions of dominant national identities (Adams, 2003; Dimache, Wondirad, & Agyeiwaah, 2017; Hitchcock, 1998; Park, 2010, 2011; Pretes, 2003), positioning museums on an authenticity continuum (Chhabra, 2008), and/or typologising museum visitors and attributes for urban tourism marketing and cultural attraction management (Jansen-Verbeke & van Rekom, 1996; McKercher, Ho, & du Cros, 2004; Stylianou-Lambert, 2011). While some previous studies recognised the contested nature of identity and the way it was formed within a museum (Bennett, 1995; Lowenthal, 2015), they have largely overlooked important insights that might have otherwise enhanced understanding of discursive practices of

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memories through museum discourses.

This study addresses collective memory-making and the (re)construction of contested national identities through a critical discourse analysis of museum representations in two distinct postcolonial destinations. It scrutinises the Hong Kong Museum of History and the Macao Museum. Although both are products of the transition from a former colony to a postcolonial ‘independence’, their (re)construction is distinct. The Hong Kong Museum of History was initially established in 1975 and (re)located to its present site in 1998 after the handover in 1997. The Macao Museum was established in 1998, one year *before* the handover, making it distinct from that in Hong Kong. Notably, both museums are part of China’s nation-building projects; however, struggles with perceptions of ‘Chineseness’ have made museums in Hong Kong and Macao highly contested in their provision of evidence for national identification (Lau, 1997; Wang & Law, 2017). Moreover, this identity crisis implies that postcolonial memory-making through museums is transnational since it involves negotiations amongst and between Chinese, Western and local memories. Transnational memory is an emerging concept that challenges bounded views on national belonging (Assmann, 2014) and, even though tourism is a transnational phenomenon, very few studies have examined memory practices across national boundaries (Frew & White, 2011; Marschall, 2012); those that have place their emphasis on understanding how transnational shared heritage sites (e.g., holocaust museums) are linked with global collective identities (Assmann, 2010; White, 1995).

As national identity construction is fundamentally about defining “Us” through identifying “significant Others” (Sarup, 1996), the transnational capacity of memories to appreciate the internal differences and relational connectedness of nations requires further research (Assmann, 2014; Bell, 2006; Sundholm, 2011). Hence museums, as articulations of conflicting memories, (re)present cultural objects transitionally and transnationally, which is inherent to the practice of postcolonial exhibitions (Nora, 1989; Parker, 1992). To understand this discursive practice of museum exhibitions, this study unpacks the way in which national identity is (re)constructed and experienced through negotiating postcolonial memories. The research draws out the idealised national discourses and discursive themes that underpin identity (re)construction in postcolonial Chinese museums. In doing so, it provides insights into the role that conflicting memories play in shaping the politics of postcolonial representations (Hall & Tucker, 2004). The article begins by reviewing the theory of collective memory, linking it to a broader discussion on national identity construction in museums and the role played by heritage tourism. Following a critique of the transnational nature of collective memories, the study outlines methodological considerations relating to critical discourse analysis in understanding discursive texts from museums in Hong Kong and Macao. The study then conceptualises museums as repositories of transnational collective memories and highlights their contribution to the (re)making of national identities.

Identity (re)construction in museums

The (re)construction of national identity is often conceived as the outcome of social processes in which individuals are exposed to collective cultural/national elements such as symbols, traditions, and memories, and through which beliefs, values, assumptions and expectations associated with (or distinctive of) the culture or nation are transmitted to its members (Kelman, 1997; Smith, 1991). As a medium of educational and cultural representation, museums forge identity development through collective memory-making.

Collective memory and museum tourism

According to Renan (1998), the concept of a nation is based on the joint action of forgetting and remembering. As widely shared perceptions of the past, collective memory is an active past that constitutes and maintains national identities (Bell, 2003; Olick, 1999). Collective or social memory scholars have recognised that memories are different from history as the reconstruction of the past is always done in the light of the present (Halbwachs, 1992). Any distinctive national identification is continuously (re)constituted and maintained through collective memories (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). This openness of collective memory raises the question of the relationship between nations and memory. Although nations can be conceptualised as self-defining communities whose members often cultivate shared memories to attach to historic territories to create a distinctive public culture (Smith, 2009), such a concept exists only in and through our imaginations and interpretations of the past (Anderson, 1991). Nations can be considered from a postmodernist perspective as a discourse, which frames a way of seeing and interpreting the world (Özkirimli, 2010). This fluid and dynamic way of approaching nations signifies that collective memories embedded within heritage sites discursively formulate a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness (Calhoun, 1997; Wight, 2016). Memory-making in heritage sites thus not only reflects the meaning of national belonging, but produces and maintains such meaning over time.

Heritage tourism has become a principal medium through which collective memories are represented to tell national stories (Park, 2010; Winter, 2009). By fashioning the uniqueness of a nation, tourism reinforces social cohesion and differentiates one nation from another (Frew & White, 2011). Tourism therefore becomes performative as it can be used to articulate the preferred meaning of people and place within destinations (Hollinshead, 2004; Jolliffe & Smith, 2001; Zhang et al., 2015). Heritage attractions become creative discursive spaces, which offer visitors a chance to engage in a specific context of time and place within which their connection to the past, present and projected future can occur (Winter, 2009). Timothy (1997) reported that heritage visitation encompasses four types of tourism experience at the global, national, local and personal levels where visitor attachments to heritage attractions are dynamic. By implication, the conceptualisation of national shared remembrance within heritage tourism plays a vital role in the construction and maintenance of an identity to define the “Self” against the “Other” (Sarup, 1996). From a postmodern perspective, fragmented and differentiated memory practices enable national members to consume the meaning of a place and to establish a sense of unity that defines identity and separates it from its constitutive “Others” within the heritage experience with the power of claiming the “true” representation of a nation (Foucault, 1982; Walker, 2001).

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