



Authenticity, involvement, and image: Evaluating tourist experiences at historic districts



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H I G H L I G H T S

- An integral model of tourists' experience at historic districts is tested.
- The mediating role of image is addressed.
- Image mediates the relationships between authenticity and satisfaction, and between involvement and satisfaction.

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A B S T R A C T

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of perceived authenticity, tourists' involvement, and destination image on tourists' experience at a historic district – Litchi Bay, China. This study also attempts to examine the mediating effect of destination image on the paths from perceived authenticity and involvement to tourists' satisfaction. Data were collected via an on-site survey and analyzed using a structural equation modeling approach. Results indicate that perceived authenticity and tourists' involvement in local activities directly contribute to the formation of destination image of the historic district. Tourists' involvement is positively associated with tourists' satisfaction. Destination image fully mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and tourists' satisfaction, while partially mediates the link between tourists' involvement and satisfaction. Theoretical and managerial implications are elaborated.

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1. Introduction

As a critical component of Chinese cultural heritage, historic districts enjoy a profound historic connotation while helping preserve and present traditional Chinese culture and history. Travel to historic districts can be classified as heritage tourism, which refers to travels undertaken with the intention to experience the places, activities, and artifacts that reflect the cultural history and stories in an authentic manner (Chaudhary & Aggarwal, 2012). The primary purposes of heritage tourism include gaining knowledge and appreciating local art, architecture, and traditions. Therefore, tourists' experience is an essential element for heritage tourism

management (Chaudhary & Aggarwal, 2012). In recent years, the number of tourists visiting historic sites in China has been growing exponentially (Hu, 2010). This increase in popularity stems from the remarkable growth that China has been experiencing in international and domestic tourism in recent decades; and the tourism growth is brought by the rapid development of Chinese economy and the implementation of the Opening-up Policy since 1978. As a socialist country, China is equipped with a social economic system featuring a marriage between capitalism and socialism (White, 2002). Reforms following the Opening-up policy have greatly encouraged capitalism growth and decentralization in policy making, including tourism development (Wang & Bramwell, 2012).

In China, tourism development in historic districts started in 1990s and is considered as an effective strategy to rejuvenate those areas (Liu & Liu, 2010). As a developing country with socialist economic systems, Chinese government is heavily involved in tourism development by assuming the roles of operator, regulator,

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and investment stimulator (Zhang, Chong, & Ap, 1999). Given private sectors are rarely existing in socialist countries (i.e., China), development of tourism is greatly influenced by government policies (Zhang et al., 1999). A political economy perspective has been applied to understand policy makings at a Chinese heritage site (Wang & Bramwell, 2012). Findings suggest that the convergence between local “policy communities” and capitalism may pose dangers to heritage protections due to economic promotions (Wang & Bramwell, 2012). In fact, decentralization allows local “policy communities” to develop tourism policies in the absence of direct intervention of national government. This political economy perspective imposes a distinctive identity on heritage tourism in China where tourism development of local regions is apt to be driven by economic pressures. The competition for business investment among cities and the autonomy of local government further exacerbate this economic orientation. As a result, unsustainable practices have emerged in a lot of historic districts, such as over commercialization of local cultures, modification of original architectures, and eviction of local residents (Hu, 2010). For example, a study on Chinese historic towns reports that 70% of main street buildings are used for catering tourists, while leaving merely 10.42% for local residents (Bao & Su, 2004).

The emergence of these issues has been attributed to the neglecting of tourists' experience on their visit to historic districts (Hu, 2010; Zhu, Xie, Li, & Fu, 2010). Tourists' satisfaction is an assessment of tourists' experience and has been extensively studied in tourism literature (e.g., Prayag & Ryan, 2012). As an evolving research interest, satisfaction with visits to historic districts deserves further investigation to provide meaningful suggestions for tourism strategy and policy development. In addition, destination image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Castro, Armario, & Ruiz, 2007; Chi & Qu, 2008; Prayag & Ryan, 2012) and tourists' involvement (Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005; Lee & Beeler, 2009) are often examined in tourism research and are considered critical antecedents of tourist satisfaction. Authenticity has been considered as the central attribute of a destination in the context of heritage tourism (Boyd, 2002); however, studies on this construct thus far have been interpretive and descriptive (Andriotis, 2011). Therefore, an integrative examination of the aforementioned constructs using an empirical approach is instrumental to understanding tourists' satisfaction with a historic site.

This study aims to examine authenticity, destination image, tourists' involvement, and their relationships with tourists' satisfaction at Litchi Bay, China, a popular historic district that exudes a rich flavor of Chinese Xiguan history and Lingnan culture. Implications for tourism development at historic districts are provided drawing on the findings of this study.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Historic district

A historic district refers to a historic and cultural conservation area that reflects the traditional features, including social, economic, cultural characteristic, lifestyle, as well as local traits originated from a historic time (Yang, Lu, & Wang, 2004). Since heritage tourism allows tourists to directly experience cultural landscapes, performances, local cuisine, handicrafts, and cultural activities of the past and present (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003), historic districts are considered as heritage tourism destinations. Tourists perceive these historic regions to be linked with “intimacy of relations and authenticity of experience” (MacCannell, 1973, p. 589). In this sense, the longing for heritage experience makes tourists receptive of the veins through which this experience is acquired:

“authentic” and thought provoking, “staged” tourism settings, artificial events, or producing self-relevant meanings from the experience (MacCannell, 1973; Richards, 1996). Heritage tourism is also considered a strategy as it boosts local culture and expands the seasonal and geographic sphere of general tourism (Richards, 1994, 1996).

Visiting historic sites has been recognized as one of the most popular activities among tourists (Hargrove, 2002). This explains why heritage tourism is among the fastest growing tourism niche markets (Aas, Ladkin, & Fletcher, 2005; Hargrove, 2002; Naoi, Yamada, Iijima, & Kumazawa, 2011; Weaver, 2011). Tourism was introduced to historic districts among western countries on an early stage and has been playing an essential role in district protection and economic revitalization.

China enjoys a unique backdrop in the sense of developing heritage tourism considering the urge for heritage preservation and economic expansion, which appear to be two contradictory components (Aas et al., 2005). The conflicts among urban construction, residents' demand, and conservation of historic districts are becoming increasingly fierce in China. Real estate developers have often attempted to modify the architectures in order to improve accommodation capacity of historic districts, resulting in a damage of the original features. Planned tourism development is therefore recognized as an effective and desirable approach to develop and protect China's historic districts (Yang et al., 2004). As the development of historic districts continues, multiple issues have emerged over time and become the primary concerns for developers and local governments, such as, excessive demolition and employment, the loss of authenticity, lacking uniqueness, distortion, ambiguous cultural image, over commercialization, and being entertainment-centered (Hu, 2010). Scholars attribute the cause of these problems to the application of inappropriate strategies without considering tourists' experience and the distinctive nature of heritage tourism (Zhu et al., 2010).

2.2. Study site: Litchi Bay

Historic districts have been enjoying tremendous popularity for tourism development in today's China. The selection of Litchi Bay as the central destination is primarily attributed to its conservation of essential streams of Chinese culture and its representativeness of Chinese historic districts. The flourish of Litchi Bay corroborates the success of tourism policies implemented at historic districts. Therefore, empirical evidence from Litchi Bay may significantly benefit the development of other historic districts in China, which is another main reason for selecting this site.

Litchi Bay is located in the west of Liwan district, part of Xiguan region in the city of Guangzhou, China. The name of Litchi Bay stems from the popularity of planting litchis in local districts since Eastern Han dynasty (196 BC). Litchi Bay has been serving as a collage of royal resorts since Han dynasty and a great number of gardens and resorts were built for royal families, government officials, and wealthy merchants in ancient China, featuring the name of litchi (Litchi Bay, 2012). Litchi Bay is referred as the “Xiguan Cultural Expo Garden” as it acts as a portrayal of Xiguan culture, exuding elegance and vitality. Xiguan culture represents an integral chapter in the nation's history and evolution, while Xiguan customs are mostly concentrated in Guangzhou (Xiguan Heritage). Litchi Bay is endowed with a plethora of attractions, featuring the combination of two most representative attributes of Chinese tourism: retrospection of history and culinary enjoyment (Loh, 2013).

Litchi Bay was recently renovated into a tourism destination and has become a well-known historic site that invites tourists to reminisce on the millennial history, appreciate the local culture, and be indulged in culinary delight. The millennial history across

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