



One museum, two stories: Place identity at the Hong Kong Museum of History



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Place identity as a co-construction between individual and official narratives.
- Official narrative based remembering positive aspects and forgetting negative ones.
- History museums used by authorities for identitarian indoctrination.
- Subtle changes identified in identitarian perceptions pre- and post- visitation.
- New model for understanding the visiting experience-narratives-place identity nexus.

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ABSTRACT

Tourism academia has attempted to individually explore the concepts of visiting experience, place identity, narratives, and history museums, but it has rarely delved into the deep and sometimes murky waters of the intimate connection among these notions. Focusing on the Museum of History in present-day identity torn Hong Kong, the current study sheds light on the identitarian and ideological implications visiting this museum has for Hong Kong born-and-raised Millennials. The findings challenge the current understanding of place identity at heritage sites of contested identity by revealing the subtle, sensitive, and fluid connections between individual and official narratives, and also among the investigated concepts. They also raise important critical assumptions about the politics of museography.

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1. Introduction

Place identity has been a recurring theme of research for tourism academia. Aiming to continue and enhance this thematic trend, the current study employs an experiential perspective to place identity. More precisely, the quest for meaning in life has turned individuals into storytellers or *homo narrans* (Fisher, 1984), which ultimately transforms the visiting experience at places of memory – concept developed by Nora (1989) – into a discourse between personal and official narratives. The aim of most history museums is to meaningfully connect these narratives by exhibiting a sequence of events in a coherent and consumable order. Hence, public memory is entrenched in the master narrative designed by

those with authority (Rowe, Wertsch, & Kosyaeva, 2002). Narratives are created by leaders to perpetuate local membership to a particular group (Anderson, 1991), thereby influencing the way people perceive the world (Bruner, 1991). These select elites usually reconstruct collective recollections according to the present agenda in order to shape the future (Halbwachs, 1992). These issues are even more stringent in destinations characterized by continuous identitarian tensions such as Hong Kong. Several identitarian differences between Hong Kong locals and Mainland Chinese were already identified by Lau and Kuan (1988) but these have not been re-addressed ever since. In times of socio-political turmoil in the Hong Kong SAR, the current study attempts to bring together the topics of visiting experience, place identity, narratives, and history museums under a thorough framework of understanding.

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2. Hong Kong: a destination of torn identity

In 2015, Hong Kong remained one of the world's top tourism destinations, climbing from 10th to 9th place in the ranking of international tourism receipts compared to the previous year (UNWTO, 2016). According to the Hong Kong Tourism Board, approximately 78 percent of the total visitor arrivals to Hong Kong in 2015 were from Mainland China (HKTB, 2016). The main motivator for most of the visitors from the Mainland is shopping (Tsang, Lee, & Liu, 2014). Thus, on the one hand, Hong Kong is perceived to be financially dependent on the monetary influx stemming from visitors from Mainland China. On the other hand, the interaction between Hong Kong residents and the large volumes of Mainland tourists have recently led to growing tension between the two groups (Liu, 2012; Luk, 2014). According to a 2015-survey conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 63 percent of respondents argued that the number of individual travellers from the Mainland had exceeded Hong Kong's capacity, while nearly 90 percent of them agreed with the need for limiting the number of incoming Mainland visitors no matter what the negative impact of such a decision on Hong Kong's economy may be (Lai & Li, 2015).

With so much at stake, understanding the identitarian context of Hong Kong becomes of vital importance to the current study. Initially inhabited by the Baiyue fishermen tribes, Hong Kong was occupied by the Han Dynasty in 111 BCE, while the subsequent dynasties further consolidated their influence in the region. It was under British rule from 1842 until becoming a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China in 1997. Officially, the Hong Kong SAR is ruled according to the 'one country, two systems' constitutional principle developed by Deng Xiaoping. According to Chapter 1, Article 5 of the Hong Kong Basic Law, 'The socialist system and policies shall not be practised in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years' (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2014). Within the legal framework of the Hong Kong Basic Law, the Hong Kong SAR enjoys a high degree of executive, economic and judicial autonomy, and the protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2014). In practice, a considerable number of scholars and journalists have been mourning the death of the 'two systems' concept, while emphasizing the ever-increasing influence of the Beijing government over the Hong Kong SAR internal affairs (Dobbs, 2014; Keating, 2014; Wong, 2004). Since the handover in 1997, there have been continuous initiatives by the Chinese government to depict a collective identity for Mainland China and Hong Kong. One of the significant ways is through the narratives that downplay the colonial relations and emphasize its identitarian relationship with Mainland China (Harris, 2014; Kan & Vickers, 2002; Kuah-Pearce & Fong, 2010; Tse, 2007, 2014; Vickers, 2003).

Nevertheless, these initiatives have been met with rising tension by the Hong Kong residents. For example, over half a million protested in 2003 against a perceived censoring National-Security Bill legislated under Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law (Chan, 2003). In July and September 2012, hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong residents took to the streets against the implementation of the perceived brainwashing Chinese 'patriotic education campaign' which purposefully gives a pro-Communist Party account of China's history and political system (Chen, 2012; Evans, 2012). In February–March 2014, tens of thousands protested for press freedom, especially after a knife attack on Kevin Lau, former chief editor of the *Ming Pao Daily News* and active criticizer of the Beijing government (Forsythe & Buckley, 2014; Li, 2014; Liu, 2014; Pomfret, 2014). The last months of 2014 saw hundreds of thousands of protesters occupying financially strategic areas of Hong Kong – a movement known as 'Occupy Central' or the 'Umbrella Revolution'

– as a result of the Beijing and Hong Kong SAR governments not agreeing to implement universal suffrage for the upcoming chief executive and Legislative Council elections (*Occupy Central with Love and Peace*, 2014).

2.1. The Hong Kong Millennials

Most of the participants and leaders of these movements were representatives of the Hong Kong Millennials – Hong Kong-born-and-raised residents aged 35 and under (Beech, 2014; Rafoth, 2014; Wong & Khong, 2015). The high level of discontent among Hong Kong Millennials is also visible from a poll conducted by the Chinese University's Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies between 23rd and 27th September 2016 on the topic of emigrating from Hong Kong. Of the 710 local respondents, 38.9 percent answered they would move elsewhere if given the chance (Cheung, 2016). Almost 57 percent of the interviewees aged between 18 and 30 mentioned they had emigration plans, compared to 26 percent of those aged 51 and above (Cheung, 2016). Approximately 70 percent blamed their willingness to leave Hong Kong on the current political environment, and many of them mentioned criteria such as higher democracy, freedom levels, and better economic perspectives for choosing their destinations (Cheung, 2016). Dr Andy Kwan Cheuk-chui – the director of the ACE Centre for Business and Economic Research – warns that the highly educated young people – the future pillars of society – are the most dissatisfied with the current political environment in Hong Kong (*Time Out Hong Kong*, 2016).

As the Hong Kong Millennials seem to be both the most affected by the aforementioned educational and economic campaigns and the most actively opposed to them, this group represents the subject of investigation for the current study.

3. Study objectives

Considering the aforementioned ongoing identitarian issues and the political nature of history museums, the main aim of the study is to explore the possible influence of the master narrative at the Hong Kong Museum of History over Hong Kong-born-and-raised Millennials' perceptions of Mainland Chinese visitors. Specifically, the study draws three interrelated objectives. In order to give validity to the second objective, the first objective of the study is to investigate the (in)existence of a master narrative at the Hong Kong Museum of History. Supported by relevant literature, this objective involves two mutually reinforcing stages: stage one – mapping the narrative trajectory of the museum; stage two – confirming/infirming the narrative trajectory by observing individual visitors' 'following' of the trajectory mapped in stage one. The second objective of the study is to critically compare the Hong Kong-born-and-raised visitors' perception of Mainland China before and after encountering the master narration at the Hong Kong Museum of History. The third objective is to explore if any of the identitarian differences between Hong Kong locals and Mainland Chinese identified by Lau & Kuan in their 1988 study are still relevant in present-day Hong Kong.

4. Literature review

The current section critically reviews the literature on three concepts needed for a thorough understanding of the discussed topic: history museums, narratives as discourse, and tourist experience as place identity.

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