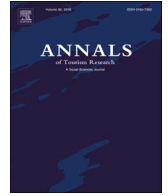


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## Cultural political economy and urban heritage tourism

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explains a cultural political economy “framing” for interpreting heritage tourism in urban contexts. Key ideas behind this research perspective are explained and illustrated through discussion of past research studies of urban heritage tourism. It is underpinned by a relational view of the inter-connectedness of societal relations, and an emphasis on taking seriously both the cultural/semiotic and the economic/political in the co-constitution of urban heritage tourism’s social practices and features. A case study of heritage tourism in Nanjing, China considers cultural political economy’s relevance and value, including the distinctive research questions it raises. It reveals, for example, how economic relations in the built environment were related to tourist meaning-making and identities in the cultural/semiotic sphere.

## Introduction

How we “frame” our research in a subject area in broad theoretical and conceptual terms is important for our understanding of that subject and the questions we ask about it. It shapes our views about “what matters and what does not, behind which lie ideas about how things work” (Harding & Blokland, 2014, p.13; Bramwell, 2015). The paper explains, applies and also evaluates one theoretical and conceptual “framing” for the study of heritage tourism in urban contexts: cultural political economy (CPE). It seeks to respond to Ashworth and Page’s (2011, p. 2) call for more theoretically-informed research on urban tourism, including urban heritage tourism, that “situates urban tourism in a more explicit theoretical context, and thus remedies a persistent weakness in many forms of tourism research that remain case study driven and implicitly descriptive in manner”. Ideas related to CPE are beginning to be used in urban heritage tourism research (Park, 2014; Su & Teo, 2009), but there is a place for a systematic and rigorous assessment of its relevance, application and value.

Heritage tourism can be important in cities and towns due to their concentrations of heritage resources and also because these urban centres attract many visitors (Law, 2002; Murphy & Boyle, 2006; Selby, 2004a). Many tourists visit urban places primarily for reasons other than their heritage resources, perhaps because they act as gateways to tourist regions or have excellent retail and entertainment facilities, but the tourists may then engage in heritage tourism-related activities. Yet heritage resources can be a notable attraction for urban tourists. Cities and towns often have a long history of economic and socio-cultural activity, and of mercantile or capitalist power, and this can leave a notable legacy of historic buildings and cityscapes or townscapes. Cities and towns are “dense agglomerations of people and economic activities” (Scott & Storper, 2015, p. 4), and they often have rich accumulated economic, socio-cultural and political histories. The “urban encounter of art, culture, technology and organization” (Rossi, 2017, p. 43) means that cities tend to be “multifaceted physical, relational and governmental space[s]” (Rossi & Vanolo, 2012, p. 18) that can

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draw many tourists to them. The paper focuses on how CPE may provide new insights into heritage tourism activities in urban contexts.

A CPE “framing” emphasises two ideas about how we study urban heritage tourism’s subject matter. It indicates, first, that an understanding of urban heritage tourism requires us to consider its inter-relationships, including with its societal context. It provides a broad perspective which seeks to understand relationships between entities, processes and context, rather than considering them in isolation. It suggests that urban heritage tourism’s relationships are co-constituting, and that they involve intimate interrelations between human agency and structural processes.

It is premised, second, on the idea that urban heritage tourism reflects important relationships between the economic/political and the cultural/semiotic. CPE represents a direct response to criticisms of political economy sometimes being insufficiently concerned with culture and semiotics, and of cultural perspectives which can pay insufficient attention to the economy, thus neglecting the materiality of social relations. Based on a review of CPE studies in urban research, Ribera-Fumaz (2009, p. 453) argues that they seek either “a cultural perspective on the city that also takes material-economic matters seriously and/or a political economy that recognizes the limits of purely materialistic accounts of urban processes”. A CPE approach to urban heritage tourism seeks to seriously engage with the socio-cultural determinants of material change, and also the material determinants of societal change. It represents a response to Bianchi’s (2009, p. 498) assertion that tourism research needs to be “simultaneously sensitive to the plural subjectivities and cultural diversities within contemporary societies and grounded in a structural analysis of the material forces of power and inequality within globalizing capitalism and liberalized modes of tourism development”.

The importance of taking seriously the cultural/semiotic and economic/political dimensions, and their inter-connections, might seem self-evident, but studies of urban heritage tourism, as in other social science subject areas, can be one-sided in terms of a selective emphasis on just one or a few dimensions, and there may be limited consideration of the interrelations between dimensions.

The paper, first, explains key ideas behind a CPE “framing” and it illustrates how some have been applied in past research studies on urban heritage tourism. The account focuses on the significance of economic and political relationships, and also of cultural and semiotic relationships (including meaning-making and representations), for the co-constitution of social practices and features associated with heritage tourism in cities. The paper, second, applies CPE ideas to case study examples of heritage tourism in Nanjing, China. The examples examine CPE’s relevance and value, including the distinctive research questions it raises. The examples were selected to assess differing aspects of CPE relations between the economic/political and the cultural/semiotic, and to evaluate them at differing urban geographical scales.

### Urban heritage tourism and CPE

The paper first explains some central notions behind CPE thinking, illustrating them using examples drawn from previous urban heritage tourism research.

#### *A relational view of urban heritage tourism*

A CPE research perspective directs attention to the relational inter-connections in society and between urban heritage tourism and society (Brincat, 2010; Chang, Milne, Fallon, & Pohlmann, 1996; Mosedale, 2011). These interconnections for urban heritage tourism include those between social processes, personal strategies, and activities, and between these and their societal context. They also span geographical scales between the local, regional and global.

The relational and often reciprocal ties around urban heritage tourism also bring together the differing social spheres of life. According to CPE thinking, these relations should not be seen as involving separate spheres; rather, they can be identified as either more largely “economic”, “cultural”, “political” or “social” (Moran, 2014). Starting with the “economic”, this is usually considered to concern the production and consumption of resources, and their distribution and circulation. “Culture” represents the meaning-making features that animate our ways of living, such as our beliefs, values, representations, social meanings and senses of self. Here the cultural as meaning-making involves semiotic processes, so that the term “cultural/semiotic” might be used. Next, the “political” sphere concerns activities associated with the distribution of power and decision-making, including cooperation and struggle around those activities; and the “social” concerns people’s interactions and what they do collectively.

A CPE “framing” suggests that the societal inter-connections around urban heritage tourism “are often intertwined and co-constitutive” (Moran, 2014, p. 3). This is because relevant processes and entities, although they are not reducible to each other, are porous and embody relationships in their wider context. Thus, varied socio-cultural, economic and political processes and their interactions with the environment will co-constitute the particular character of, say, a heritage precinct or a city museum visited by tourists (Bramwell & Meyer, 2007; Castree, 2003; Harvey, 1996; Sum & Jessop, 2015). The intertwined and co-constituting relations between social spheres is evident in the influence of capitalist neo-liberalism on urban developments (Rossi & Vanolo, 2012). Thus, Barnett (2005) sees neo-liberalism simultaneously as a mode of regulation in the economic and political spheres; a discursive-moral governmental rationality in the cultural/semiotic sphere; and a reflection of long-term rhythms in the social and cultural spheres.

In the social sciences interpretations differ around the relative influence of differing social spheres of life on contemporary society, with neo-Marxist political economists often seeing the economic and political as highly influential, while cultural studies researchers can suggest that culture is the key (Harding & Blokland, 2014). CPE seeks to bring these perspectives together by evaluating the relative influence of differing societal spheres in specific circumstances and contexts. This aspect of societal relations, as well as others, are seen as specific to particular geographical and temporal contexts (Bramwell & Meyer, 2007).

Several research studies on urban heritage tourism highlight the value of relational perspectives on the social processes and

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