A structural model of host authenticity

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ABSTRACT

Authenticity is significant for all modern peoples, including hosts. Hosts have the right to make their own interpretation of authenticity. The model that we constructed explains the process of hosts' authentication through structural analysis of the antecedents and consequences of hosts' authentic experiences. The effects of personal economic benefits are indirect and hidden, with personal emotional benefits being the key factor that mediates the conflict between economic benefits and authenticity. The model explains the complex but delicate mechanism of how hosts balance their dual demands, 'benefits from tourism' and 'authentic culture'. When hosts use support for tourism as power to obtain hegemony over authenticity, they focus only on objective authenticity, which also implies ethnic tourism has become superficial in China.

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Introduction

As inheritors and interpreters of traditional cultural heritage, hosts are also an important presentation of traditional cultural heritage, particularly in that they are often involved in the production process of the tourism product, including making traditional handicrafts, showing their life status to tourists, and participating in various forms of tourism performance (Deng, 2010). When hosts are

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considered suppliers and creators of authenticity, host communities are simply treated as the object of tourists' authentic experience (Ap, 1992; Chhabra, 2005); how hosts experience authenticity has been neglected. Getz (1998) emphasises the importance of community control and acceptance for the authenticity of events. Cole (2007) examines authenticity from a local perspective, i.e., villagers' interpretation of the authenticity of ethnic minority areas under commercial tourism development. Steiner and Reisinger (2006) explicitly put forward the concept of host perception of authenticity, which is the opposite of tourist authenticity. Host perception of authenticity does not refer to evaluating the authenticity of hosts' living environment and lifestyle from tourists' perspective (tourist gaze) or customed authenticity formed in the interaction among tourists and hosts (Wang, 2007), nor does it refer to the reverse gaze (also-called second gaze or questioning gaze) of hosts back upon tourists to curtail negative impacts and redirect the tourist gaze (Chhabra, 2010). Here it means hosts as subjects perceiving the authenticity of their own culture (host gaze) rather than as objects being gazed upon by tourists.

However, some may not be able to understand host perception of authenticity; they believe that only tourists perceive authenticity and that authenticity and tourist activity are linked. As Zukin noted, "We can only see spaces as authentic from outside them. The more connected we are to its social life, especially if we grew up there, the less likely we are to call a neighbourhood authentic" (2008, p. 728). However, the concept of authenticity is not derived from tourism. "Authenticity is important but it is significant for all modern peoples, not just the category of tourists. The search for authenticity may lead people to travel but it may be found just as easily at home. Authenticity lies in connections, not in separation and distance" (Hall, 2007, p. 1140). Authenticity is a concept that derives its meaning only through the positing of its opposite. At the core of all such dualisms is a conception of boundary (Kelner, 2001). Authenticity is valuable only where there is perceived inauthenticity (Taylor, 2001). If the environment is not gradually becoming inauthentic, people would not be aware of or care for authenticity. For tourists, MacCannell (1976) makes the claim that tourists are so dissatisfied with their own culture (Chhabra, 2005) that they seek authentic experiences elsewhere and want to experience the authenticity of others. For hosts, often, it is because tourists' very search destroys the authenticity of the tourist destination, which, before the tourists' quest, was presumed to be pristine and untouched (Bruner, 1994). As a result, local residents living in the tourist destination become aware of judgment and focus on whether their own culture remains authentic when their distinctive traditional culture is being eroded by commodification.

Many scholars argue that tourism and the improved economic conditions have sponsored 'cultural revivals' in both material and non-material forms (e.g., Grünewald, 2002; Li, 2006). The commodification and marketing of ethnicity has become a powerful force for the preservation and protection of communities and the (re)construction of identities (Yang & Wall, 2009). However, commodification is a double-edged sword. A common view in the literature has followed: "tourism turns culture into a commodity, packaged and sold to tourists, resulting in a loss of authenticity" (Cole, 2007, p. 945). Homogenisation and standardisation mainly caused by tourism leave little room for individuality, so it is unlikely that mass tourism is going to be conducive to authenticity among hosts. The reason stated by Steiner and Reisinger is that "imposing alien values on host communities or applying economic pressure is also unlikely to encourage authenticity and may even force conformity among hosts" (2006, p. 310). Boorstin's (1961) book, which concerns 'staged events', also states how the presence of tourists distorts and commodifies cultures, which also raises concerns about hosts' inability to be authentic because they must pander to tourists' expectations.

Sun (2010) note that hosts do have their own views on the interpretation of their culture by the outside world and have their own perceptions of and criteria for the authenticity of their culture. However, when the commercial packaging of tourism deviated from local culture and made it inauthentic, the hosts had no way to express their views because they were often ignored and lacked discursive rights, which are rooted in the development mechanism. From Boorstin (1961) and MacCannell (1973) onward, the issue of studying authenticity has always been with the 'Other' perspective, examining fringe communities, marginalised groups, and cultural change. How hosts authenticate ethnic resources lacks sufficient attention. Especially, the level and structure of host perception of authenticity is worth studying.