

CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES ON MARKETING HONG KONG'S CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM ATTRACTIONS

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Introduction

Addressing the radically different needs of the tourist, who is travelling to seek experiences, and the community, that seeks some financial benefit from the traveller, poses the greatest challenge for tourism in general and for cultural tourism in particular. The commodification of cultural heritage assets presents a number of issues for their management, not the least of which is the challenging task of accommodating both the needs of the tourism industry and the ideals of local attraction managers (Bazin 1995, Cheung 1999, Peleggi 1996, Robb 1998, Sletvold 1996). The marketing and commodification of heritage assets for tourism includes more than just promotion of a selected group of assets, it should also cover their presentation, conservation and strategies employed for visitor management to balance conservation, host community and tourism needs.

Ashworth and Tunbridge (1996) note that local people and tourists have quite different expectations of heritage, which may not necessarily coincide. Although obvious this point can cause many problems in the official selection of heritage for promotion to tourists because there may be tension between tourism and local uses. In particular, tourists are likely to come with a variety of needs and expectations, some of which may have been created through clever marketing. Getting the balance right between educational and entertainment in the presentation of an attraction may not be possible if the goals of tourism planners and attraction managers are disparate.

Tourism experiences, especially many cultural tourism experiences, have their basis in entertainment. To be successful, and therefore commercially viable, the tourism product must be manipulated and packaged in such a way so as to be easily consumed by the public (Cohen 1972). Clearly, learning opportunities can be created from the experiences, but their primary role is to entertain (Ritzer and Liska 1997). Even museums and art galleries that are developed to provide educational and cultural enlightenment have recognised that they are in the entertainment business and have arranged their displays accordingly (Zeppel and Hall 1991, Tighe 1985, McDonald and Alsford 1989, Prideaux and Kinnimont 1999). The reason is that only a small number of tourists really want to seek a deep learning experience when they travel. The rest are travelling for pleasure or escapist reasons and wish to participate in activities that will provide a sense of enjoyment. In Hong Kong, many cultural heritage assets are presented with an educational or religious goal foremost in mind and for the host community. Little reference is made on-site to

local culture as a blend of East and West in line with Hong Kong Tourist Board's marketing or presented in a way that is entertaining as well as educational for overseas tourists. The local community also misses out, as many of the larger museums are not visited by people beyond school age due to this strict emphasis on education and less on fun (Chow et. al 2002). Heritage trails (that include heritage places both secular and religious), temples and museums are conceived by attraction managers to be educational or sacred foremost and tourism needs are seen as an additional and much less significant function, which requires little effort to be accommodated. Although the Hong Kongness of these heritage assets is evident in many cases to locals, it is not necessarily presented in a way that will make it familiar or appealing to the majority of overseas tourists (du Cros et. al.2002, McKercher et.al 2002).

However, without asset managers agreeing to list tourism as one of their asset's foremost functions, many other heritage assets may not be conserved or funded even though the main user groups are not tourists, but schools or worshippers and pilgrims. The examples that fall into this category are usually small temples, isolated buildings and villages away from the main centres of population not the larger and more central museums and temples. Heritage funding may not stretch to conserve these assets without some appeal to community or charity resources to assist in their repair and maintenance for the purpose of presenting it to tourists. Paradoxically keeping them for schools or locals to visit is just not seen as an important enough reason to seek such funding, despite the heavy emphasis on educational and religious goals at the larger, more centrally located museums and temples. However, as tourism attractions, the former could be described in marketing terminology as secondary and more usually tertiary attractions or demand generators (McKercher and du Cros 2002). In a tourism attraction hierarchy, some heritage assets could be considered to be primary or 'icon' attractions that will draw tourists to a destination in their own right. Such attractions are usually spectacular like Hong Kong's Big Buddha at the Po Lin Monastery or rare like many of the World Heritage sites. Secondary attractions will appeal to tourists once they are already at a destination and are examining the options for best use of their time and so become a more discretionary choice for tourists. The most discretionary choice of all will be made to visit tertiary attractions, which are usually common site types or occur in more remote places and that

are not well known. Many of the heritage assets currently conserved and promoted for tourism in Hong Kong tend to fit into the last category. Also, they receive little in the way of on-site presentation of interesting information to tourists to enhance their experience of the site and to protect it by engaging their co-operation in its conservation. Some authorities have found that how signage is worded regarding the maintenance of the cultural value of a site can influence how visitors behave, particularly in remote locations where monitoring tourism closely is difficult (Jacobs and Gale 1994). Lessons that have been learned the hard way in many other countries regarding visitor management have yet to be learned here in Hong Kong.

Much of the problem revolves around the fragmented nature of the authority and responsibility for tourism at such places. It has been observed in a recent study by the author of Hong Kong heritage attractions that although as many as 90 of these heritage places are promoted they are not actively managed for tourism. The Hong Kong Tourism Board, which is the peak tourism marketing body for Hong Kong, sees its role as promotion in a narrowest sense. Accordingly there is little dialogue with site managers such as the Antiquities and Monuments Office, Chinese Temples Authority creating a situation where the latter have little understanding of tourists' needs or the will to provide for them. Worse still, problems are only dealt with in a reactive process (well after they have occurred) as will be seen in one of the case studies. The authorities mentioned only respond to complaints from host communities and negative articles in newspapers quite late in the process by which time visitation and other activities have damaged the cultural value of the heritage places concerned.

Tung Chung Heritage Places and the Ping Shan Heritage Trail

Two heritage places of concern occur near Tung Chung, a town on Lantau Island (which also boasts Hong Kong's new airport). They comprise the foundations of a military site, a battery and a Chinese/Western fort. The battery is on a slope overlooking the ocean off a small access road well out of town. It is difficult to reach and to locate and once they are there visitors often find it is overgrown. Signage is minimal and inadequate for getting a clear understanding of the site's significance.

The fort shows more evidence of care about interpretation with some display boards posted in one of its rooms, but its current use as a school precludes much sense of the site as a fort. Not many historic forts are to be found in other countries such as Canada or the United States that would also boast a basketball court in the parade ground. Regardless of these limitations and their low overall tourism appeal, these sites are still being promoted as heritage attractions by the HKTB. It has not sought the co-operation of the Antiquities and Monuments Office (and in the fort's case the Department of Education) or the

local community in upgrading their presentation and management. It would be wiser for the sake of sustainable tourism in Hong Kong, if visitors were directed to more appropriate attractions that are more accessible, better presented and managed.

A recent government initiative has unwittingly put the lack of active management for tourism into media focus at the other example of the Ping Shan Heritage Trail. This government initiative was to promote tourism attractions in each of the 18 newly designated government districts to encourage some decentralisation of tourism spending. The districts and the Hong Kong Tourism Board chose the attractions to promote and each month a different district took its turn. Problems arose when Yuen Long was made "District of the Month" for March this year and was heavily promoting the Ping Shan Heritage Trail as a "signature attraction that visitors should not miss". Unfortunately, this has turned out to be not the case. The trail was the first and least successful of the Antiquities and Monuments Office's heritage trails aimed at locals and schools. It has had a chequered management history and many problems between stakeholders since opening in December 1993 (Cheung 1999). Although HKTB is loath to admit it, it seems likely that little of this was taken into account when the choice was made to promote it and very few of the stakeholders were consulted. Other than producing a new brochure for the trail, nothing new appears to have been done on-site or with the co-operation of the local residents to present it to tourists. Accusations were made in the media that no one connected with this project had actually visited the site first prior to increasing its profile. A newspaper reporter found that: signage was neglected making it difficult to follow the trail; key buildings along the trail were closed (as some owners had withdrawn their support of the trail and due to other problems); most did not have brochures available; maintenance of some key structures was poor, and the visual appeal of some structures was affected by garbage nearby. One lone tourist was seen wandering around lost (SCMP 3 March 2002).

The trail is also much shorter than the original one from 1993, probably because some of the heritage buildings in private hands have been closed to visitation since then after an unresolved dispute between the AMO and local clan leaders regarding visitor management and other issues (Cheung 1999). The more recent problems also show that the remaining trail is not being actively managed as a single unit by either the local clan or the AMO. An editorial in the same paper criticised the Board for not taking a more proactive role in the management of the trail before promoting it saying "even though the Board has no control over the trail's attractions – or most of Hong Kong's scenic spots for that matter – they should have at least made regular inspections of those they routinely promote to check that they remain scenic" (Editorial SCMP 3 March 2002). Despite the poor visitor experience it provides and the negative attitude to tourism held by some members of the host community, the trail has not been

removed from the generic promotion of heritage attractions of Hong Kong (HKTB 2002).

Future Opportunities for Improvement

Some hope for future improvement of this situation may be gleaned from several new developments. First, is the establishment of a new government authority for tourism planning and management known as the Hong Kong Tourism Commission. Having been initially set up to encourage large development projects, such as snaring the Disneyland project for Hong Kong, it is now looking more holistically at tourism development. It has a strong focus on sustainable solutions to tourism dilemmas and is undertaking a series of regional studies of natural and cultural assets that stress stakeholder involvement and conservation of heritage values. The Commission also hopes to facilitate a closer link between the previously parallel processes of tourism marketing and heritage conservation, so that a more proactive approach to these can be maintained.

Second, a new Chief Executive Secretary has also been appointed to the Antiquities and Monuments Office, which may broaden its vision of its role in heritage tourism and allow more contact with HKTB and other stakeholders. The AMO has a key role to play in the selection and planning of heritage attractions for sustainable tourism that could be pursued more actively. Finally, it is hoped that a sub-chapter of China ICOMOS will be established for Hong Kong and Macau, which will promote the *ICOMOS Cultural Tourism Charter, 1999* within the region and advocate best practice cultural heritage management.

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