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TTRA 2020 Extended Abstract

Residents' Perceptions on Touristifying Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong

Introduction

This research aims to examine residents' views on touristifying Cantonese Opera in Hong Kong. Developing cultural tourism is an emerging trend for destination marketing organizations across the globe, in which intangible cultural heritage (ICH) plays a crucial role. ICH represents a person-place bonding, which is important to the continuity and sustainability of ICH (Morgan, 2010; Zandieh & Seifpour, 2019). Such bonding continues the affective connection of community members to specific place, giving people a sense of identity and continuity. The support of local residents in touristifying any ICH items

Featuring the East-meets-West multicultural vibe, Hong Kong exhibits great potentials in employing ICH into tourism product. Amongst all the ICH items in Hong Kong, Cantonese Opera by far is the only ICH inscribed onto both the National and the city's ICH lists. Cantonese opera, as a performing art, is featured on the Hong Kong Tourism Board's website as a manifestation of the living culture of Hong Kong, signifying its tourism value to international tourists (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2019). Cantonese Opera was thus adopted as the study context.

Literature Review

The touristification of ICH has become more salient than ever. Dewailly (2005, p.31) defined touristification defined as 'the process by which a tourist space is built'. Local traditions, cultural festivals and special events have been promoted as tourism attractions (McKercher, Mei & Tse, 2006). As such, these events serve as an arena for international tourists to experience the authentic cultural ambience, interact with locals, and obtain first-handed indigenous experience. From the destination perspective, converting cultural products for tourism consumption is financially efficient since little additional cost is required for physical development (Gursoy, Kim & Uysal, 2004). Notably, ICH gives tourism destinations unique positioning and fuels the lucrative tourism industry. The connection between tourism and heritage is inseparable but it also brings considerable shortfalls. Scholars criticize that utilizing cultural heritage as tourism product hurts the localities in social and cultural realms in which the real benefactor was the economy of destinations.

ICH is community-based; thus, community participation is pivotal in safeguarding and developing as tourism product. UNESCO (2005) echoes the significance of community participation. An effective mechanism in heritage preservation should emphasize the active engagement and participation of stakeholders in the planning process. Since the middle of 1900s, participatory planning has been advocated by academic scholars. The people who are most affected by the growth and development ought to have a voice in how their futures is programmed. Such notion is corresponded with the growing awareness of sustainability, ways in optimizing economic and social benefits while minimizing the negatives of development.

Planning projects that are entirely determined by the top-down approach could receive limited success. The present study therefore employs the ideology of participatory planning as theoretical justification.

Methodology

A qualitative investigation was pursued to achieve the research aim. The in-depth interview questions were self-developed and modified based on the theoretical ground of Tan, Tan, Kok and Choon (2018). Key interview questions included:

- What is your perception of Cantonese Opera?
- Do you regard the Cantonese Opera important to Hong Kong? Why?
- How to sustain Cantonese Opera?
- Will you recommend international visitors watching Cantonese Opera during their stay in Hong Kong? Why?

20 Hong Kong citizens were interviewed from June to July 2019 to delineate their perceptions on Cantonese Opera and sense of place. The in-depth interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour. Half of the interviewees reported themselves as big fans of Cantonese Opera, while another half had very minimal understanding of the ICH item. Majority of the interviewees were female. Insights on sustaining Cantonese Opera and adopting it as tourism product were also discussed. Thematic analysis was performed to analyze the findings.

Validity of qualitative research has come to the fore. Rich data, as well as data and theoretical triangulation will be employed to deal with the validity threats. Rich data is about the detailed descriptive note taking activity. Verbatim transcripts of the in-depth interviews will be pursued as a source of later treatment (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The gestures and tones of voices of interviewees will also be recorded to reflect the significance of issues. Furthermore, data triangulation, collecting materials from multiple sources such as documentation, archival records and primary data collection, will be performed.

Results

Half of the interviewees reported themselves as big fans of Cantonese Opera while the remaining interviewees were not. The first group of interviewees had watched Cantonese Opera since their childhoods or in their teenagers. It was a very popular yet common entertainment in the old days as very limited entertainment options were available. Despite of the long history of Cantonese Opera, they all points to the evolvement of the performing art, such as the new plays, styles of costumes and more sophisticated staging effect. The non-fans however regarded Cantonese Opera as old-fashioned since majority of the regular audience were at their middle-ages. The availability and wide diversity of leisure options also discouraged them from watching the ICH item. Interestingly, both groups of interviewees regarded Cantonese Opera highly important to Hong Kong. While the city was very small geographically speaking, Cantonese Opera has been flourishing for both locals and Chinese migrants staying in other countries. The quality of the art form has remained superb in Hong Kong since the top actors, actresses, musicians, and tailors in moved to the city from Mainland China due to the Chinese Revolution. Several interviewees

stressed that self-identity and sense of belonging was justified by the uniqueness of a place. According to the interviewees, Hong Kong has been politically chaotic since the handover in 1997. They were once confused about their self-identity. Since the ideology of localism emerged throughout the past decade, increasing attention has been given to the ICH items of Hong Kong and public called for preservation. They then perceived the continuity of ICH was important in justifying their self-identities. Thus, raising the awareness of Cantonese Opera among locals and international tourists was significant in making Hong Kong known around the globe. In addition, majority of the interviewees perceived the city as a boring tourist destination. Hong Kong has been known for shopping and gourmet for years and very minimal attractions have been built to attract tourists. Promoting the ICH item, something unique to Hong Kong, was inductive in differentiating the city from other competing tourism destinations. The opening of Xique Center, a theatre for Cantonese Opera and other performing art forms in the West Kowloon Cultural District, offered extensive opportunities. Situated in the conventional touristy location, the new venue and the surrounding facilities are expected to bring more local and global attentions. The public and private sectors, as well as local residents, both had roles to play in sustaining and touristifying Cantonese Opera.

Conclusion and Discussion

The finding of the present study justifies that the bonding between community and place is crucial to tourism development, in particular the touristification of ICH. The results echo the notion of participating planning. Theoretically, future research can further reveal the association between sense of place in nurturing the safeguarding and touristifying unique cultural product of destinations. As for practical contribution, the finding highlights the importance of engaging residents in tourism planning and development. The public sector and destination marketing organization should come up with creative initiatives in soliciting the voice of citizens for a sustainable tourism future.

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