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Creative tourism, Social capital, and the Transformation of Urban Villages

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Introduction

Urban spaces with low population density and unique cultural or natural resources often become hubs for creative tourism. Urban villages, or *Chengzhongcun* in Chinese, meaning village in the middle of the city, are primary targets for urban regeneration and transformation in China's urbanization process (Li & Li, 2011). As an adjunct to cultural tourism, creative tourism has taken place in many destinations including these urban villages. Exogenous and endogenous approaches were taken to transform some urban villages into cultural creative districts. While many Chinese urban villages were reconstructed based on "policy tourism" and top-down approaches, a few cases showed endogenous actions of artists and lifestyle entrepreneurs and organic transformation appeared. From the perspectives of organic place-making and social capital, this research examines the on-going transformation of cultural creative urban villages in the largest city in central China, Wuhan, and investigates the process of organic place-making through community social capital and stakeholders' participation.

Creative tourism is defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientifics and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as "travel directed toward an engaged and authentic experience, with participative learning in the arts, heritage, or special character of a place, and it provides a connection with those who reside in this place and create this living culture. (UNESCO, 2006, cited in Richards, 2011). Urban villages in China are villages that appear on the outskirts and downtown segments of major cities. They are low-density, surrounded by modern urban constructions. Urban villages are a unique phenomenon that formed part of China's urbanization efforts. Plans for cultural creative districts were implemented by many cities to transform these places into urbanized existence. Due to the complicated dual-track land ownership system, the transformation of these places pose many problems. At the same time, they also represent a property-based solution to provide low-cost accommodation to a majority of work force (especially floating population) in the city. With their unique cultural and natural resources, urban location, and low rent, independent artists, lifestyle entrepreneurs, and tourists were drawn to the urban villages.

Creative tourism strategies such as rebuilding heritage district into creative clusters took place in many Chinese cities, such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou. Many of the transformation followed a top-down approach driven by city governments and land developers. Examples of bottom-up developments often resulted in failure to operate. For example, Beijing's Songzhuang art village became home for a massive group of artists and thrived in late 1990s due to the low rent and peripheral location. Although Songzhuang was originally home to only avant-garde painting artists, it expanded and is now home to diversified groups and levels of artists from painters to photographers to sculptors and beyond. In recent years, there were numerous conflicts between artists and local residents on rental contracts resulting in the loss of artists and decay of the art village. Thus, from the perspective of creative tourism production, governance and the

management of stakeholders remain as major challenges in sustaining the creative clusters. Social capital in the forms of social relationships, networks, and collective action among creative tourism stakeholder groups is likely to be an important factor in the process of transforming urban villages into creative tourism destinations.

To summarize, using creative tourism for urban reformation in China followed two strategies: the top-down placemaking, which was deliberately planned and implemented from the city government and major capital, and the production of creative spaces by artists and the creative group from outside of the locality. Unlike bluntly vacating the historic buildings, transforming urban villages incrementally required more social interaction among the external participants and local residents. We consider the second approach of place-making non-invasive, more organic, more sustainable. Unlike in developed countries, the “creative class” has dominated the workforce and comprised the market for creative experiences (Florida, 2002, 2012), the rise of the creative class in China is slower and constrained by the social and political contexts (Rao & Dai, 2016). Therefore, the consumption of creative tourism has gradually increased and is more salient in a few major cities. This research selects the largest city in central China, Wuhan, due to the existence of cultural creative and historical districts and the rise of the creative class in the city. We raise three research questions: a. How did mundane urban villages transform into cultural creative tourism destinations? b. How do artists and entrepreneurs engage in creative tourism production and place-making of the villages? c. What was the role of social capital in touristic place-making?

Literature Review

In the current tourism literature, there is a debate on to what extent tourism participates in place-making and drives place transformation (Hultman & Hall, 2012; Lew, 2017; Sopiold, Guia & Specht, 2017). Place-making is defined in this research as an incremental process of planning, designing, and making the place through bottom-up, local initiatives driven by individual agency (Lew, 2017).

Creative tourism and the transformation of urban space

Existing literature on creative tourism mostly lies on examining the creative tourism, creative tourists and their experiences (Ali, Kisang, & Hussain, 2015; Lee, 2014). Tourists are active co-creators of creative tourism experiences and participants in creative place-making. Tan et al. (2014) distinguished five distinct groups of creative tourists were identified: novelty-seekers, knowledge and skills learners, those who are aware of their travel partners’ growth, those who are aware of green issues, and the relax and leisure type. A few studies aim at the production of creative tourism and the evolvement of creative tourism destinations (Blapp & Mitas, 2017; Diassardinha, Ross, & Gomes, 2017; Liu & Wang, 2016; Saarinen & Kask, 2008). A stream of such literature focuses on the strategies of creative tourism. Fernandes (2011) examined the creative strategies of Viana do Castelo in Portugal as an emerging destination and identified the preservation heritage buildings and creative building design contributes to the construction of creative spaces. Culinary specialties and food are contributors to place-making and creative tourism (Everett, 2012; Nelson, 2015). There is also a trend on participants of the supply side in

creative tourism such as creative businesses (Mohammadi, Moharrer, & Babakhanifard, 2018), and local indigenous communities (Blapp & Mitas, 2017).

Creative tourism injects creativity in cultural tourism and becomes a crucial place-making strategy for urban spaces (Kostopoulou, 2013; Richards, 2011). The promotion of the creative industries, creative cities and the creative class has become gradually popular in urban destinations. There has been a tendency globally for the creative class to congregate in particular places and produce a creative ‘atmosphere’(Florida, 2002), creative clusters were formed. According to Mommaas (2004), these cultural-creative clusters could strengthen the identity and attractiveness of the place, stimulate an entrepreneurship among the “creative people”, stimulate innovation and cultural diversity, as well as transform old buildings and areas with creative ideas.

Place-making: Stakeholders and social relations

Place making shows us the potential of both the organic and the planned approaches to creating great places for locals and visitors. It provides us with a clearer understanding of the elements of urban design and human behavioral responses to urban design, as well as place programming and image building (Lew, 2017). Governance is a crucial element in place-making (Hultman & Hall, 2012). Local communities, specially art communities are agencies for place-making for creative tourism (Sofield et al., 2017).

The concept of place-making has been attached social meanings in existing research. Social capital emphasizes investment in social relations based on the mutual recognition of benefits (Lin, 1999). Bridging and bonding social capital are categorizations of the concept. Bridging connects social capital from outside the community and bonding social capital refers to the social relations generated within a closed structure (Putnam, 2001). Therefore, social capital can be explored from many levels (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Place-making requires social resources to achieve collective efforts. And social capital may be an outcome of place-making efforts and strategies. The measurement of social capital largely depends on the research scenario. Indicators of social capital are also varied and selected under specified rationales. This research considers social capital as resources possessed by the communities of urban villages, including collective action, informal and formal alliances, and bridging and bonding networks. Delconte, Kline, and Scavo (2015) used the Community Capital Framework (CCF) to assess the impacts of community-based arts centers on their communities, particularly on heritage tourism and confirmed the positive effects of art and culture on community place-making.

From existing academic research on creative tourism and place-making, there is a trend on the production of creative tourism and the place-making strategies from multiple stakeholders. There is also a lack of dynamic observation on the roles and creativity of people and their daily-lives. This research aims at identifying the localized effort and social capital in organic place-making. This research considers the transformation of creative urban villages an integrative process influenced by the participation and collective effort of many stakeholders and the practice of creative tourism.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative grounded theory approach. Grounded theory was chosen as the methodological path based on the phenomenon-induced nature of this research. Grounded theory is a widely used qualitative methodology in social science research (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The present study is guided by the observation of a unique case of organic place-making in urban China and adopts a constructive orientation with grounded theory approach (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). In tourism and hospitality research, the use of “theory” is often ambiguous, and it is used more as an analogy than as a substantive term, which induces misunderstanding and miscommunication. The generation of theory is therefore more difficult in the field of tourism and hospitality research, in which more practical issues are tackled; however, limited theories are generated. Grounded theory is adopted as a process of inquiry to identify the latent mechanism of place-making at this creative tourism site with many contextual specificities.

Wuhan is the capital of Hubei province and the most populous city in Central China. The number of registered permanent residents is over 10 million. It is a major transportation hub, with dozens of railways, roads and expressways passing through the city and connecting to other major cities. The Yangtze River, the world's third longest, flows through the city. Wuhan is also the scientific, cultural and educational center of central China, with its strength in this regard ranking it third among China's cities, behind Beijing and Shanghai. There are 52 higher educational institutions in Wuhan, many have art-related programs and fostered a large group of young creative population. In 2017, Wuhan was enlisted as the Creative Cities Network City of Design designated by UNESCO.

The case area of urban villages is located in the East lake, which is 5A rank tourist scenic spot surrounded by four major universities and follows the unique transformation of Dali and Xiaoli villages into a utopia for young artists and lifestyle entrepreneurs. Secondary data were collected in the forms of urban village transformation documents, and media reports on the creative tourism at East lake villages. Electronic photos of the village through the years from 2015 to 2018 were collected via the Internet and the stakeholders. Primary data include 35 in-depth interviews with artists, entrepreneurs and local residents and participant observation at the site.

Results

Artists and lifestyle entrepreneurs were important agencies in the place-making of east lake villages. The villages were hallowing before the first artist came in 2015, the rent price tripled from 2015 to 2018. The transformation of the urban village into an art village includes four stages based on the participation of external artists and entrepreneurs: utopia for lifestyle urbanists, creative cluster for freedom-seeking artists, capital ingestion and government involvement. The process induced changes on environmental characteristics such as infrastructure, facilities, and architecture, and socio-economic elements such as population mix, rental prices, and relationships among stakeholders. Findings indicate that social capital plays a significant role in organic place-making of the art village. Artists and entrepreneurs' social networks contributed in bringing human capital to the place, informal alliances made sure the creative tourism products they offered were heterogeneous and the small businesses could

survive and sustain. The artists and entrepreneurs also formed an association under the governance of the administrative community committee, the association served as a mediator between external entrepreneurs, administrative departments, and local residents and is also responsible for the collective marketing efforts and other publicity duties.

There were 50 businesses and artist workshops in the villages, 10 of which opened in 2018, and only 17 had been in the villages since 2015. Because of the collective landownership and the protected status of the east lake area, new buildings were strictly regulated. There was a shortage in rented housing for new artists and entrepreneurs. Many lifestyle entrepreneurs and artists were forced to move out because of the lack of income and failure of their start-up businesses. While there was a high turnover rate, many older businesses survived and thrived taking advantage of the flow of tourists to the East lake area.

Local residents were shown to have positive attitude towards the development of creative cultural tourism in the villages. Currently 50% of the village houses were rented to artists and entrepreneurs, and only half of the residents remained living in the villages. As one interviewee stated:

There are two clans here (in the villages), one is us the creative artists and entrepreneurs, we hang out and drink coffee, and the other is the villagers, they gather every day to play Mahjong. The villagers only care about how to raise rent, and we entrepreneurs are concerned with how to slow the rent rise.

Our findings reveal that there were different stakeholder groups in the villages and there were perceptual gaps between the artists and local villagers. Despite so, some of the landlords built friendship with the artists and entrepreneurs and showed supportive sentiments towards the lifestyle they pursued and their start-up businesses. In the meantime, other local residents did not pay attention to the creative culture and what the artists were doing in the villages. As the villages become more and more famous, more stakeholder groups started to be involved in the place-making.

One notable incident took place when the municipal government started paying attention on the villages, as Wuhan, and specially the East lake area, will be a major site for the 7th Military World Games in 2019. Although the villages have become a creative cluster, the infrastructure remained undeveloped. While local communities look forward and push government involvement, artists and lifestyle entrepreneurs had mix-feelings about the potential outcomes. For instance, it would improve the village living conditions and flow of tourists if the infrastructure is improved, on the other hand, the rising rental price may push small art businesses out of the village. The artists also fear that the government planning and reconstruction will demolish their original place-making efforts. As one interviewee said:

Because the government has strong administrative and executive powers, it is like a double-edged sword, if they use it well, this place will be good, if not, this place will be destroyed. Because of the administrative power, imagine if the government suddenly wants to flip the village, fixing all the roads, placing all the facilities, and tidying it all up, the government thinks it is doing a good thing, but actually it is a bad thing, in a short time, say two months, it will likely double the rent here.

To summarize, styles of governance and top-down interventions may pose challenges and conflicts on the organic place-making process and the formation of partnership assured the

communication between entrepreneurs, village committee, and city-level government. The construction and place-making of these villages into creative tourism destinations has become a strategic act. The tourism potential brought by the East lake as a major attraction has been recognized by the artists and entrepreneurs, they were confident on the future prospects of the villages but were also aware of the challenges during the process. This research resonates the findings from Sofield et al. (2017) that forms of sustainable urban tourism can be achieved through organic community engagement in place-making even when tourism is not a primary motivation, although institutional challenges remain in terms of land ownership and the complexities of stakeholder groups.

Conclusion and Discussion

Creative tourism and art contributes significantly in capitalizing these villages while creating a nostalgic cultural vibe. Theoretically, this research contributes to understanding the touristic place-making from a special context, the Chinese urban villages, and confirming the role of creative tourism and its suppliers in sustaining the locality and reality in urban spaces. It provides an interesting addition to the tourism place-making literature that has been dominated with worldviews and practices from developed contexts. Practically, this research provides evidence that organic place-making through creative tourism met the lifestyle goal of artists, economic needs of residents, and the political expectations of the governments. Implications for urban village transformation were given to better manage the relationships and provide channels for dialogue and negotiation among stakeholders.

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