A mirror with two sides – heritage development and urban conservation in the Ancient City of Pingyao, China

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Abstract

In an historic urban context, physical setting forms an environment that generates the uniqueness of a place, and the activities in this physical setting enrich its cultural value. Along with the demands of modernisation, changes and development are inevitable in an historic settlement. In addition to the need for economic development within the nation, the concept of heritage development in China has also been strongly influenced by political reforms and civil wars during the past 100 years. This paper explores the development of heritage tourism in the Ancient City of Pingyao under these apparent and hidden factors since it was inscribed on the World Heritage list in 1997.

Introduction

Since the ‘Economic Reform’/‘Open Door’ policy of 1978, China has been an active participant of the global community. The open door policy has attracted a great number of international tourist visits. The WTO has also predicted that China will be the world’s largest market for tourists by 20201.

Regardless of the large-scale destruction of traditional urban settlements due to urban growth, tourism development plays an important role in preserving some historic sites for their high profile cultural capital and potential economic value. Not only does cultural heritage bring economic value to the local and central government, the designation of heritage sites on the World Heritage list also strategically plays an important role in China’s participation on the global stage in the twenty-first century. At the time of writing, China has 37 sites inscribed on the World Heritage List2. The Ancient City of Pingyao is one of them, chosen for its high level of integrity of city planning and townscape.

The development of heritage tourism facilitates urban conservation because of the economic value that tourism generates. The impact of tourism development in Asia, including social, economic, physical, and cultural issues, has been broadly discussed by scholars. However, the hidden reasons that pertain to tourism-driven, rather than community-driven, development are seldom addressed. In China’s long history, it has been through several political reforms over the past 100 years. Long periods of civil wars, world wars, and socialist revolution have created invisible impacts on society and affected people’s attitudes toward cultural heritage and local identity. In this exploratory research, the case study of the Ancient City of Pingyao in China is introduced to discuss the dichotomy of heritage conservation and heritage tourism development, and to clarify the proper definition of cultural heritage as part of a transitional process.

The historic context of the walled city of Pingyao

The Ancient City of Pingyao in Shanxi Province is the birthplace of the draft banking/financial system in China, and is the hometown of Jin Merchants Faction, the major business group in northern China. Many picturesque buildings were built by Jin Merchants and the gentry in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. After the Jin Merchants’ culture declined around 1911, Pingyao was neglected by the public and private sectors because it lacked the natural resources necessary for industrial development. However, this saved the city from major destruction and kept the city intact until the present. When China started its economic and political reform in 1978, domestic and international tourism became possible. Its historical significance and architectural integrity enabled the Ancient City of Pingyao to be inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1997. Now the city has become a domestic and international tourism destination. It has experienced different social and cultural impacts, both directly and indirectly, from the development of heritage tourism, since the walled city started its preparation for the World Heritage nomination.

From a successful financial city during the Qing Dynasties to a living city of 45,000 people during the Communist era, Pingyao was self-sufficient with much historical richness and was planned according to traditional ritual canons and Feng Shui principles. When China opened its market, Pingyao, with little attention from the central government, was faced with the opportunity to generate local revenue and to compete with other cities. For inland cities like Pingyao with no natural resources, heritage tourism is the most popular developing trend. Although the walled city was the typical city plan in ancient China, it has become an ‘endangered species’ (Bruce & Creighton 2006: 238) in modern society. The designation as a World Heritage Site emerged as a trophy for local government, earning recognition from the central government and from local residents because of the economic benefits that tourism would bring in. This recognition has increased Pingyao’s reputation worldwide and has brought the chance for a transformation of its social, cultural, financial, and physical environment.

The entire Shanxi province was famous for its Jin Merchant culture and the banking system, and the Ancient City of Pingyao was famous for its establishment of the first draft bank. In order to maximise the economic value of the site and to attract domestic and international tourism, the city has been developed into a collection of museums representing commodity and money convoy services (biao ju)3 and financial banks from the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The delineation of the tourist district has turned the city centre into a tourist-only place, characterised by tourism-oriented businesses and newly restored buildings. Indeed, the entire tourist district exists more as a cultural industry than a cultural heritage site. The tourism-
driven preservation and interpretation in the district is extremely symbolic and political. The rapid economic growth has caused the economic value of cultural heritage to be confused with its cultural value at both the national and local levels.

**Revisiting the meaning of cultural heritage in China**

**The modern meaning of cultural heritage in China**

The concept of historic preservation, based on European experience, is relatively new in Asia and can not totally apply to the situation in China, in particular due to its historical uniqueness. After the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1911, severe internal and external upheavals shook China for 40 years. China united again in 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong started the Chinese Socialist Revolution. In order to follow the Stalinist model of industrialisation (Fairbank 1992), China switched its national emphasis to developing heavy industry and initiated an educational shift from liberal arts to scientific subjects. Furthermore, Mao criticised traditional Chinese culture for being unscientific, feudal, anti-modern, and anti-socialist (Sofield & Li 1998). Any social science research related to cultural heritage was considered to be bourgeois and connected with capitalism and the West, and any endorsement of cultural heritage was considered an impediment to new development.

During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, most Chinese traditional culture was destroyed in the name of getting rid of the ‘four olds’ — old ideas, old customs, old habits and old culture — and was replaced by a ‘new socialist culture’ (Sofield & Li 1998: 364). This socialist culture dominated the entire country and induced mass destruction of traditional cultural artefacts inherited from previous dynasties, associating only negative connotations with the concept of cultural preservation. However, new Socialist China did not succeed in establishing a modern China; on the contrary, it created a disconnection between people and their cultural roots. What resulted was not only the destruction of the past, but also a grim and uncertain future filled with poverty and want.

After the Economic Reform in 1978, development of tourism related to cultural heritage became a symbol of modernism. The preservation of cultural heritage became a way for the Chinese government to make a statement about democracy and diversity to the world. Cities and towns became aware of the concept of restoration and the rehabilitation of tangible heritage. However, there are disparate interpretations of ‘historic preservation’ that reveal a gap in understanding between the locals and the central government. The central government treats the preservation and conservation of traditional culture as an immediate task because of the high cultural capital it generates and its enhancement of national unity (Sofield & Li 1998) and international identity. On the other hand, locals have seen tourism development as a money-making machine that brings economic enhancement to their community. For both the central and local governments, the attraction of international tourists is the first priority for cultural re-establishment.

**Historical meanings of cultural heritage to the locals**

In addition to the modern interpretation of cultural heritage, the disconnection between local communities and cultural heritage is another factor that has affected the pattern of cultural development in China due to the consistent displacement of its population. Prior to the establishment of Socialist China in 1949, civil wars, warlords, and Japanese invasion had led to the displacement of populations throughout the nation. Following the termination the feudal system by Socialist China, there was little initial improvement in this situation because of the control over the system by the State. Mao received great support from the peasantry through his land distribution policy, dispossessing big landlords and reallocating property to the poor peasants (Fairbank 1992). In order to build an equal society and to accommodate the huge number of poor peasants, certain rural populations flowed into cities. In other words, there has been a migration of people from the countryside to the cities, as well as vice versa. As a result, a picturesque, traditional courtyard house was inhabited by four to six families. The traditional community system was replaced by a new administration system, such as the Commune (gongshe) and work unit (danwei).

After decades of land redistribution and political movements, current inhabitants are not descendants of the original owners, and have no relationship with the people who built and originally owned these properties. Thus, people do not have strong attachment and feeling toward their houses. In the walled city, the majority of traditional buildings are made of wooden frames and require restoration and continual maintenance. Due to the lack of knowledge of building structures and respect for their history, restoration work upon these buildings can easily become vandalism (personal interview with initiator of World Heritage nomination 2005). When local government commenced the preparation of the World Heritage nomination, it became compulsory policy for local residents to preserve their traditional courtyard houses. However, it is difficult to compel residents to maintain their properties without financial support from central and local governments.

The strategic aim in Pingyao is to increase the economic value of the traditional courtyard houses, with a resulting increase in the cultural value of the city: the argument is that property owners will accrue funds generated by the courtyard houses and this will provide the resources to maintain the historic houses. Local residents indicated their willingness to take good care of their houses, because they saw the economic potential that traditional courtyard houses brought to them through tourism development (personal interview 2005). Therefore, the potential economic value of having a traditional house is an important incentive for local residents to participate in urban conservation. However, the lack of historical connection between people and the land turns cultural heritage into a commodity for sale. Without the recognition of the vulnerability of cultural heritage, preservation becomes a temporary project for immediate needs.

**Research findings**

**Survey result**

The purpose of this research is to understand the conflict among local stakeholders, including their attitudes towards tourism development and representative history in tourism. The research was a field-based case study, compiled using quantitative and qualitative methods. In addition to archival research and direct observation, 50 resident surveys and 7 personal interviews were undertaken in 2005 and 2006. Among resident surveys, 70 per cent of respondents lived inside the walled city and 30 per cent lived outside. Due to
historical issues, these respondents were expected to have experienced the major political changes in the Ancient City of Pingyao, including the Cultural Revolution, Economic Reform, and recent tourism development. Thus, the older community were preferred target respondents. Gender was not a variable which was considered.

According to the survey results, only 4 per cent of the respondents mentioned that the history between 1911 and 1949 had a significant influence on their families, and 18 per cent mentioned being significantly influenced by the events that occurred between 1949 and 1978. During the land revolution in Socialist China, the wealthy owners of these picturesque houses were forcibly evicted. Thus it is likely that the majority of existing residents are not the descendents of the original owners of the courtyard houses, and on the contrary, are descendents of workers, poor and lower-middle class peasants, who benefited from the political changes. Consequently it was not a surprise that 48 per cent of respondents claimed they experienced huge impacts from the contemporary changes, especially economic prosperity.

Since Pingyao was inscribed on the World Heritage list in 1997, several policies to achieve urban conservation and heritage tourism have been adopted by the local government. Among them, the relocation of population, called ‘depopulation’, was one of the most controversial. Its goal is to indirectly move local residents from inside the walled city to the outside without paying them much in compensation fees. The plan is to relocate factories and public service systems, including schools, municipal offices, and hospitals, to the new town adjacent to the walled city. These changes would cause a significant portion of the population to relocate, either under the direction of the central government, or voluntarily for convenience. According to the survey, 40 per cent of respondents who currently live outside of the walled city moved to their present location between 1994 and 2000, because of the relocation of job sites. Thirty-three per cent moved to the outside the walled city after 2001 to look for a better quality of life, when tourism became the dominant activity in the walled city, creating traffic congestion and inconvenience in daily life. The government indeed successfully managed to reduce the density of the walled city after the preparation of the World Heritage nomination started in 1994.

In the Ancient City of Pingyao, tourism development has had more positive impacts on local residents than negative ones. Based on the residents’ surveys, 36 per cent of interviewees think tourism development created a huge impact on their daily life, while 64 per cent think the impact is relatively minor or acceptable. Sixty-nine per cent of interviewees currently living inside the city do not plan to move to the outside of the city in three years. Among them, 75 per cent of those who have no plan to move in the next three years are older than 46 years old, and 87 per cent of them have a monthly income of less than 300 Chinese yuan (about US $40). These two survey results reveal that the majority of senior and low-income residents are not able to move to the outside of the walled city, despite the fact that vital services have already left the city. However, most of them addressed the advantage of living inside the walled city and still considered the city a living place because of place attachment, social networks, and affordability.

In the Ancient City of Pingyao, tourism development was an accidental success for the local government, while it is what the local community understood would occur following the inscription of the historic city on the World Heritage List. Policies implemented by the government to achieve urban conservation and heritage tourism have caused controversial debate among stakeholders. Although the local government never fully embraced the importance of the Jin Merchant culture, it has become the main theme of tourism development in the walled city. The survey result shows that 46 per cent of respondents, regardless the lack of a historical attachment, consider the Jin Merchant Culture as the representative culture of the walled city. The dissonance between the city’s decision-makers and regular citizens affects the direction of urban conservation in the Ancient City of Pingyao.

Modified definition of heritage development in China

Rapid economic development in China precipitated the mass destruction of historic cities and heritage relics after 1978. While the nation’s attitude was different than during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, the desire for modernity throughout the nation fueled similar patterns of destruction. Compared with most historic cities in China before they were destroyed, the Ancient City of Pingyao is not an ideal specimen in terms of city building and capital investment. Now, however, it is the only historic city that has retained a high value of planning and architectural integrity.

If the Ancient City of Pingyao was not inscribed on the World Heritage List, the situation of the walled city would be worse than it is now. To Pingyao residents, World Heritage designation is similar to a laurel wreath that puts local community pride on alert (personal interview with the scholar 2005).

For some time, the future of the ancient city was a question mark among both the public and private sectors. Personal interviews with people in practice and in academia revealed that they shared a common idea: it is the economic development of heritage tourism that has saved the Ancient City of Pingyao from destruction. Its designation as a World Heritage Site brought new breath to the city, and the development of heritage tourism has provided the motivation for the host community to maintain their cultural heritage. However, local residents and government usually ignore the fact that the most important responsibility associated with World Heritage designation is the continuity of the site’s cultural heritage into subsequent generations; otherwise, the designation would be no more than a short-term product for cultural consumption. In the Ancient City of Pingyao, urban conservation and heritage tourism is a mirror with two sides that need to work together closely and carefully.

While China has been experiencing rapid economic growth, the walled city of Pingyao relies on heritage tourism to speed up its economic development. Tourism development with predictable benefits is the major incentive for urban conservation in historic cities with high cultural value like Pingyao. Since the walled city was inscribed on the World Heritage list in 1997, local government and local tourism operators have developed the historic city into a tourism destination to attract both international and domestic tourists. The competition between sites and the need to provide tourists with amenities and modern facilities has placed pressure on the city to develop. In order to maximise the economic value of the site and to receive attention from domestic and international tourism, the government in Pingyao has restored most traditional anchor buildings back to their original form and style.
for the purposes of tourism. In addition, more and more of the traditional courtyard houses, siheyuan, and vernacular, cave-like dwellings, yaodong, were converted into hotels or museums. The intense demands of the tourist industry have induced functional changes and structural changes to old buildings. Cohen (1988: 380) addresses the inevitable agenda of commodification in tourism development, and argues that commodification ‘is a process by which things (and activities) come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value, in a context of trade, thereby becoming goods (and services)’. In order to attract more tourists, ‘the destination areas of tourism are conscious constructions of images to be sold, involving a selection of elements to be displayed for sale’ (Lask & Herold 2005: 120). While the locals are trying to please and attract more tourists, they are also experiencing the biggest threat arising out of commodification, namely, the loss of the meaning of culture.

When examining the attributes of local residents in the walled city, because of this lack of deep historic attachment to the city, it was easier for local residents to ignore their own cultural background, social value, and personal experiences and allow the walled city to be preserved for tourists and for the city’s economic benefit. The answer to the questions of ‘preserve for whom?’ and ‘preserve what?’ is ‘tourists’ and ‘what’s needed for the development of heritage tourism’ in the walled city. Although the majority of the residents agree that Jin Merchants can represent the culture in Pingyao, the preservation of the Jin Merchant culture is geared to preserving the physical environment instead of the social and cultural fabric of local communities. Greenwood (1989), who conducted one of the first studies on the commodification of culture through tourism, is echoed by Cohen (1988: 382) who ruefully expresses the situation, that ‘[t]ourist-oriented products frequently acquire new meanings for the locals, as they become a diacritical mark of their ethnic or cultural identity, a vehicle of self-representation before an external public’.

In addition to the threat of commodification to the meaning of cultural heritage to the local population, the policies implemented by local government are the major cause of dissonance in local society. According to the survey results, most people currently living inside of the walled city are tourism-related business operators and residents with less social privilege. In order to establish a competitive tourist destination, local activities were indirectly forced to relocate to other places due to the implementation of policies – including the delineation of a tourist district – that imposed a business-type control in the district. For local residents, the impact from tourism development was considered a minor factor. However, the government tends to favour tourism development, and local residents typically tolerate this in order to receive the immediate economic benefit that tourism provides. This is a particularly relevant debate in the walled city of Pingyao, where most residents are not descendants of original owners of the picturesque courtyard houses. Due to the lack of historical connection with the traditional courtyard houses and an efficient regulation of urban conservation, the restoration of the historic structures and the choice of representative heritage were dictated by a tourist-driven preservation that encourages decisions based on consumption.

According to the interviews, most scholars and practitioners in urban conservation agree that heritage tourism is part of a positive cycle in preserving historic Asian cities, especially in China. In the case of Pingyao, it is more urgent to emphasise the need for local residents to recognise that heritage is the medium through which they can link the past with modern needs, and that the link can only exist when proper preservation and management practices are followed. A proper restoration strategy will bring more economic benefit in the long run; otherwise, it would only be myopia for a short term (personal interview with scholar 2005).

However, when local residents rely on tourism, ‘an explicit domination of commercial values over conservation values’ (Nasser 2003: 472) becomes obvious. This concern is particularly serious in the walled city, since this fundamental issue that embeds and impedes the preservation movement has the potential to twist the meaning of preservation and to make the preservation of historic cities even harder.

Of course, local residents need experts to tell them how to restore courtyards in the right way (personal interview with the initiator of World Heritage nomination 2005).

In the walled city, the urban conservation policies need to be oriented toward maintaining and sustaining the historic city while considering the adaptive uses of historic buildings and their continuity.

**Conclusion**

The concept of historic preservation, which is based on a European model, needs to be modified and re-defined when it is applied in Asia, especially in China. Theoretically, a sustainable historic-tourist setting is expected to create socio-economic change without sacrificing the ecological and social systems on which the community and society rely. Accordingly, maintaining the integrity, cultural identity, and historical continuity of the place are the major reasons to conserve and regenerate it. However, this case study in the Ancient City of Pingyao suggests that the economic value of preserving a heritage site outweighs its cultural value. Local residents agree that tourism development has a much more positive influence on the local community. In addition to the pride and identity at national or local levels that accompanies the preservation of cultural heritage, the immediate need for economic benefits and political merit are major reasons to sustain an historic site. Although a heritage designation provides both the city and nation with a convenient way to improve economic conditions, the hidden danger of heritage designation is that it may only end up recognising selective attributes.

The development of heritage tourism is an inevitable trend for most traditional urban settlements in Asia, since tourism development is seen as the catalyst of economic development at the local and national scales. Tourism development certainly helps to achieve urban conservation in China. However, the subject of the case study in this exploratory research, the Ancient City of Pingyao, has become a place for cultural consumption, which creates an atmosphere of staged authenticity in a tourist setting (MacCannell 1973). The influence of commodification is not restricted to the products (local culture) themselves, but also affects the physical environment (place itself). Places become investment targets that are created for the trade of services and goods. As Sack (1992) states, ‘heritage places are places of consumption and are arranged and managed to encourage consumption; such consumption can create places, but is also place-altering’ (quoted in Graham 2002: 1006-7). Because Pingyao is not the
ancestral home of most residents, this makes it easier to compromise when the purpose of urban conservation is to satisfy the need and curiosity of tourists, instead of building up the pride and identity of the local community.

Many scholars (e.g., Conzen 1981; Assi 2000; Nasser 2003; Gospodini 2001; Greenwood 1989) emphasise that the purpose of historic preservation is maintaining both the physical environment as well as the site’s socio-cultural aspects. However, the designation of World Heritage Sites creates the possibility of the twisting, manipulation, and misuse of local history, especially when heritage tourism is involved. In the case of the Ancient City of Pingyao, the selection of representative history and people’s attitude toward their properties are other hidden factors that facilitate tourism-driven development forces. The process of cultural commodification turns the meaning and the concept of authenticity into an economic fringe product that mainly fulfils the curiosity of tourists. In China, urban conservation and heritage tourism is a mirror with two sides that attempts to retain cultural heritage in a modern society. The participation of local residents and the continuity of local activities are the essence of the culture, and are part of the living heritage that can be passed on to future generations. In order to sustain the local culture of a heritage community, while evolving through a changing era, the socio-cultural aspects of local community cannot be neglected when heritage development is involved in a living community in the twenty-first century.

Bibliography


Endnotes


3 In ancient China before the draft banking system was popular, all commodities and money were delivered from one city to the other by a group of armed people.