Sustainable cultural city: risks and opportunities of cultural tourism development in Hong Kong, Macao and Kaiping

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Heritage as cultural capital for the city

In the report of a meeting organized by the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) on Economics and Heritage Conservation (Mason 1999: 12), cultural capital was defined as:

a concept useful for understanding the position of heritage as an economic phenomenon whose full value cannot be captured by traditional economic categories and tools. Placed alongside other types of capital – physical buildings, roads etc, natural (environmental resources and systems), and human capital – it was proposed that the addition of cultural capital would improve this way of thinking...Cultural capital views heritage as an asset that appreciates over time.

Economist David Throsby (2001) defines cultural capital as both tangible and intangible values that are embodied in the assets and are yielded by the goods and services they produced. The intangible cultural capital exists in ideas, traditions, beliefs, and customs shared by a group of people which also includes language, literature, music, and so on. The tangible cultural capital refers to such assets as historical buildings – that is, architectural heritage, which, according to the third principles of the European Charter of the Architectural Heritage, is regarded as;

a capital of irreplaceable spiritual, cultural, social and economic value. Each generation places a different interpretation on the past and derives new inspiration from it. This capital has been built up over the centuries; the destruction of any part of it leaves us poorer since nothing new that we create, however fine, will make good the loss. Our society now has to husband its resources. Far from being a luxury this heritage is an economic asset which can be used to save community resources.

Cultural capital and sustainability development in cities

In The Cultures of Cities (1995), American sociologist Sharon Zukin argues that the consumption of culture through such media as art, food, fashion, music, graphics, architecture, packaging, products, movies, tourism, has come to serve as a basis for the urban economy by fuelling its industries, and creating a healthy, competitive business environment. The visibility of culture in the city designed for mass consumption produces branding, symbols and landmarks, and the word culture has become so intertwined with economic activities that it provides the capital as well as the image for a city's economic systems.

The social researcher Marie Hoff (1998) contends that the leading challenge ahead for urban societies would be the integration and harmonization of cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors in order to achieve sustainable development. This idea is echoed in Hong Kong's study on Sustainable Development for the 21st Century in Hong Kong (SUSDEV 21; published in 2000), which envisioned a Hong Kong that balances social, economic, environmental and resource needs, both for the present and future generations, simultaneously achieving a vibrant economy, social progress and a high quality environment, locally, nationally and internationally, through the efforts of the community and the government.

However, in SUSDEV 21, cultural capital is not explicitly spelt out as part of the essential ingredients for the city's sustainable development, but is rather implied. Given that this study was commissioned in 1997 – at the very beginning of post-colonial Hong Kong – when Hong Kong people's awareness of their collective cultural identity had not emerged, scant attention was paid specifically to cultural development. It was not until the study was completed and released in 2000 that the protection of cultural capital by means of heritage conservation became a topical popular issue on the agenda of academics, professionals, politicians and the common people in Hong Kong. The milestone for such increasing cultural and heritage awareness was marked by the launch of the region's first dedicated postgraduate professional training programme in architectural conservation at The University of Hong Kong.

Harold Kalman, a Vancouver-based heritage planner and Honorary Professor of the above-mentioned Architectural Conservation Programme at The University of Hong Kong, has on many occasions contended that direct economic benefits can be reaped from a city's cultural capital, if such capital can be protected and nurtured as a means to attract high-spending residents and tourists. Indeed, demographic studies show that people with above-average income are attracted to live in cities because of the diversity of cultural activities and their spending power to 'consume' these activities. Attracting such people to a city increases the municipal tax base, which, in turn, attracts higher-end industries and economic activities. For many cities throughout the world, the consumption of culture by locals and tourists has become a major source of revenue for the economy. Tourism, in particular, is stimulated by increased cultural related activities and facilities in cities, which give rise to a entire new form of industry – the cultural industry (a North American term) – that in turn creates employment and investment.

Case study 1: Hong Kong

Sharon Zukin (1995) considers that art and culture has a role in urban society in humanizing the city and in binding its complex
social fabric. Hong Kong, having long neglected art and culture as key ingredients for achieving social sustainability during its colonial period, has been putting more investment into art and cultural development since its return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. There are many reasons for this belated cultural renaissance, one of which is the realization that it needs to urgently cultivate a distinctive cultural identity of its own in order that Hong Kong will not be relegated to another soulless commercial Chinese city such as Shenzhen. As Tung Chee Hwa, the post-colonial Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’s (HKSAR) first Chief Executive (a Beijing-appointed post-colonial governorship for Hong Kong) expressed in his 1998 Policy Address: ‘to foster a sense of belonging and identity, we need to promote our heritage, which is a valuable cultural legacy.’ It is telling that this was perhaps the first time in Hong Kong's history that a governor spoke of the need to foster Hong Kong's own cultural identity. Another reason is the recognition that Hong Kong, which prides itself as a special East-meets-West place, has the opportunity in developing into a world-class international (meaning Western) cultural venue with Chinese characteristics. Tung Chee Hwa spoke ambitiously in his 1999 Policy Address: 'I have proposed to develop Hong Kong into an international centre for cultural exchanges. This will help to strengthen our identity as a world-class city.'

Yet, two years later, in his 2001 article 'Culture Shock', Chaim Estulin, a writer and cultural critic for Time Magazine, raised the following question: 'Hong Kong's government spends more per capita on arts than almost any other place in the world. So why are we still in a cultural desert?'. He elaborated that:

Hong Kong [is] second only to Germany in per capita government expenditure on the arts. At [HK]$286 per head, Hong Kong's government spending on the arts was $10 more per person than was France's. And yet nobody then or now mistakes the SAR for Paris. Are we getting value for our money?

With so much investment in art and culture, why has Hong Kong not developed cultural capital on a par with that of Paris? In his 2005 article 'Hong Kong's New Culture', Estulin continued his criticism of the HKSAR Government's expensive, imported and spectacular approach in investing in the creation of the city's major cultural capital for the twenty-first century:

a master plan by British architect Norman Foster, the West Kowloon Cultural District is slated to include at least four museums, four performance venues, art schools, galleries and studios, all housed under a swooping, transparent canopy (that covers an area of 20 hectares). The district is to be built without any outlay from the public purse. It's the kind of project a well-oiled, popular administration should be able to push through without effort.

Yet inevitably, the controversy involves money. The government plans to award the entire project – which could cost up to $6.8 billion – to a single consortium, which would build and then run the cultural facilities for 30 years.

It is not surprising that the ambitious and glamorous West Kowloon Cultural District project has not endeared itself to knowledgeable cultural critics, as it is flawed by its overly commercially oriented approach. By depending on the financial resources of developers, the project can only be justifiable as a profitable mode of development. The art and culture component thus became relegated to the side, as packaging using imported museum brand-names like the Getty and the Pompidou which are money-making corporations and whose very elitism and foreign-ness make it difficult for the Cantonese-speaking majority to relate to. The underlying risk is that such expensive, imported high-culture kind of cultural capital may serve neither the cultural aspiration of the local majority nor the interest of overseas tourists. Why visit a second-rate Hong Kong branch of the Pompidou Centre and not go to the real thing in Paris? This is exactly the point that Estulin was trying to make in his 2001 article: Hong Kong is best being itself rather than a poor imitation of Paris.

The tourism potential of Hong Kong's local cultural capital is still being officially neglected. A case in point is the long-awaited statue of the legendary Bruce Lee, for which the government reluctantly granted a location after years of intense lobbying by local and overseas fans. The statue, erected in 2005 with privately raised money, became an instant tourist attraction. In 2001, Hong Kong attracted 13.7 million of incoming visitors, representing a growth of 4.5% of the GDP. A survey conducted by the Hong Kong Tourism Board in that year revealed that attractions of strong local character were among the top eight most visited places, while none of the modern museums and cultural events in which so much money had been invested made the top ranks (Table 1 on following page).

The lesson to be learned but that is still not being learned in Hong Kong is that the kind of cultural capital that offers the greatest opportunities for cultural tourism is not something purchased and imported, but something it owns and is readily available. Hong Kong's unique chaotic clash of the local Cantonese culture and the colonial British culture defines its tangible and intangible cultural character in every way, from the juxtaposition of Western (including modern) and Chinese (feng-shui influenced design) architectural elements in the physical built environment, to the eclectic pseudo-Western Chinese menu in local eateries. It is this cultural duality between the East and the West, never quite blending but co-existing awkwardly, that defines the cultural identity of the local people and draws the interest of overseas tourists. The overtly commercial nature of Hong Kong developed from its trading-port colonial past has made it difficult to shake off the decision-makers' and financiers' 'imported-is-good' attitude. Only by recognizing the value of its own home-grown cultural capital can Hong Kong begin to evolve into a city with its own cultural soul and personality, and only then will the city begin to attain sustainability.
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<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Places visited</th>
<th>% of visitors</th>
<th>Special interest activities</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Victoria Peak</td>
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<td>Gourmet Dining</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Ocean Park</td>
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<td>Repulse Bay</td>
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<td>Traditional Chinese Festivals</td>
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<td>Wong Tai Sin Temple</td>
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Table 1: Hong Kong's top tourist attractions / special interest activities in 2001.
(Source: Hong Kong Tourism Board 2000 'A statistical Review of Hong Kong Tourism': 8: 22).

Case study 2: Macao

Macao, a tiny former Portuguese enclave of about 23.7 square kilometers and an equally tiny population of 448,495 people (2003 census), offers a case of how cultural capital is exploited in a sustainable way to create economic benefits. Immense publicity was generated by the listing of its historic core as a World Heritage in 2005 and Macao is riding this cultural momentum in diversifying its economy into cultural tourism, which has proven to be successful. A recent survey on the economic impact of cultural heritage, found that 60% of the total retail revenue came from shops located in two protected historic areas, the Leal Senado Square and the Sao Domingos District.

For years, Macao has been regarded as a colonial backwater with a steady but lacklustre economy dependent mainly on the casinos. The one positive thing that came out of this lack of economic achievement was the almost intact survival of its old physical urban fabric and historical architecture. Unlike Hong Kong, Macao never had the rate of population increase and commercial opportunities that would enable the creation of a speculative property market during the 500 years of its colonial history. The irony is that the Portuguese took Macao as a base for trading with China, but with the exception of the late seventeenth to eighteenth centuries where trade rose to its zenith, it went on a decline since the nineteenth century and business never took off until after the colony was returned to Chinese sovereignty.

Since reunification with China on 20 December 1999, Macao has taken on new challenges and adopted new economic model to revitalize its post-colonial economy. The most significant of the new economic developments is the opening up of the previously local and monopolized gaming industry to international gaming operators, who have plans to develop Macao into a Las-Vegas style world-class multi-entertainment casino centre. It is perhaps unmatched in the history of cities that so much investment is pumped into the development of so small a city within so short a timeframe. The benefit of this opening up of the gaming industry is not only the bigger scope to generate more revenue for the local economy, but also to ensure an economically sustainable way to maintain its prized cultural capital – the World Heritage part of the city – through the plentiful amount of revenue generated from the gaming tax.

Macao is therefore taking full advantage of the double opportunity offered by two seemingly contradictory industries – one very much cultural in nature and the other anti-cultural. However, the more the opportunities, the greater the corresponding risks, which will be manifest in both the short and long term. In the short term, the increased number of tourists in such a small place will begin to compete for space with the local population. The small local population has begun to feel that they are being overwhelmed by the increasing number of outsiders. Already, the locals are complaining of having to change their lifestyle by not going to certain places at certain time of the day in order to avoid the tourist crowd. Another common complaint is the rising property value, the result of an unprecedented demand for living quarters and work offices by immigrants and expatriates attracted to Macao by its flourishing economy. In the long term, the influx of cultural and gaming tourists will inevitably require the building of bigger infrastructure and more supporting facilities, which will quicken the pace of change of its physical environment. The increased development pressure for new tourist facilities and amenities will risk encroaching upon the buffer zone that protects the historic core. If the development pressure is sufficiently strong, development control in the buffer zone may be relaxed. Once this protective buffer is compromised, the precious World Heritage cultural capital that it protects will be at stake.

The fundamental problem with cultural tourism in Macao is that it is so physically small, which limits the tourist carrying-capacity. In the next phase of Macao's development, the city will have to find effective means to manage the scale and scope of the tourism as well as to manage the pace of change of its physical and social urban environment. For Macao, sustainable development will hinge on finding equilibrium between two polarities that threaten to overwhelm each other.

Figure 2 Macao – Leal Senado Square and the Sao Domingos District in the heart of the historic centre of Macau, a 2005 World Heritage Inscription, is the fusion of Chinese and Portuguese heritage and legacies.
the old protected core and the new waterfront development; the local residents and visiting tourists; the prestigious World Heritage cultural capital and the profitable Las Vegas-style gaming industry.

Case study 3: Kaiping

Located on the western fringe of the Pearl River Delta, Kaiping is the least urbanized of the three case studies and it has not reached the level of tourism development in Hong Kong and Macao. Kaiping is a region noted for its contribution to the Chinese Diaspora in the nineteenth century, when a combination of civil war, famine and over-population caused large number of the local population to flee to such far-flung places as North America and Southeast Asia (British Malaya and Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies). Today, some 750,000 descendants of the original economic migrants from Kaiping remain living abroad, and they include 300,000 in North America alone. Like their forefathers, these ‘overseas Chinese’ have donated significant sums to their related communities back home, which helped to sustain the local economy during the chaotic times from the late Qing dynasty through the Warlord Period of Republican China to the end of the catastrophic Cultural Revolution in the People’s Republic. With little natural resources and a population of about 600,000 – too small to sustain large-scale industrialization, Kaiping’s economy has fallen behind other nearby cities.

There is almost a stampede to jump on the World Heritage List bandwagon now that many economically underdeveloped places in China rich with previously untapped cultural capital understand the cultural gold-mine they are sitting on. The Kaiping Government has recognized its unique legacy of the overseas Chinese, whose tangible expression is the unique vernacular architectural typology: fortified tower houses or diaolou, a combined home-and-sanctuary that protected the successful overseas returnees from bandits and kidnappers in this once lawless place. They are a character-defining element in the physical and cultural landscape of Kaiping, and truly represent Kaiping’s tangible cultural capital. Some 2,000 diaolou, scattered across Kaiping’s 18 townships, have been listed by the government to be of heritage value. Many of these listed diaolou are under official protection. Although descendants of the original diaolou owners are scattered around the world in places where the emigrant forefathers first settled, they are united by their special identity of being overseas Chinese.

Recognizing that the diaolou heritage and the Overseas Chinese legacy are cultural capital that can be exploited for tourism development, the Kaiping Government has embarked upon the task of conserving diaolou buildings and sites for application to the World Heritage inscription. While it has done well in the technical aspect of conserving the built heritage and improving on the sites’ physical environment, the work is apparently carried out with purely government funding. There is no private financier, as in the case of Hong Kong’s cash-rich property developers, or revenue-generating mechanism, as in the case of Macao’s culture-tarne marked portion of the gaming tax, to help develop tourist facilities and infrastructure, and sustain the long-term operation and maintenance of the prospective World Heritage sites. Unlike Hong Kong and Macao, which operate as highly autonomous Special Administrative Regions with a free market economy, Kaiping is a municipal-level administrative entity within the planned economic system of Mainland China. As Kaiping is an economically under-developed place relative to Hong Kong and Macao, the lack of private investment in the development stage will severely constrain the scope of work, while the lack of a stable, sustainable flow of revenue for operating and maintaining the sites will pose problems in attracting local and outside investments.

The advantage for Kaiping is that it has a clean slate in creating a cultural tourism-based economy. If Kaiping’s World Heritage application is successful, it will open up a whole world of tourism-based opportunities for developing service-oriented cultural industries, with implications for local employment and overseas investment. However, the risk for Kaiping as a World Heritage is in cultural heritage management, or the lack of it. Lijiang is a case in point of a World Heritage Site run riot, with rampant commercialization that has transformed its cultural capital into a commercial vehicle for making hard currency from tourists, and destroying the cultural capital in the process. Selling the Chinese soul to the foreign devil, as one might call it. Like many heritage sites in China, Kaiping’s cultural capital is vulnerable to irreversible heritage mismanagement practices. Hong Kong and Macao are fortunate in that their local tertiary educational institutes have set up professional academic programmes that are oriented in heritage or tourism management. The University of Hong Kong offers two professional programmes, one in the conservation and management of built heritage, and the other on cultural heritage management.6 The Institute for Tourism Studies in Macao offers a wide range of tourism-related undergraduate (and soon postgraduate) programmes, some with focus on the operational management aspect of tourism, such as the training of heritage tour guides. Sensing that expertise in heritage management and tourism management must work hand-in-hand, the programmes from these two tertiary institutes have joined forces to combine expertise and resources and become strategically affiliated with UNESCO to become the regional centre for such professional training. The problem with Kaiping is that there is no local tertiary educational infrastructure for the setting up of similar programmes, and it must therefore rely on academics and professionals from nearby places, such as Hong Kong, Macao and Guangzhou.

The risk in the mismanagement of Kaiping’s cultural capital and cultural tourism can only be minimized by training its professionals. The main obstacle to resolving this problem is that there are no private heritage professionals in Kaiping – the

![Figure 3 The Diaolou of Kaiping in Guangdong, China, are late 19th and early 20th century fortified towers houses, a combined home-and-sanctuary that protected the successful overseas returnees from bandits and kidnappers in the rural areas west of Pearl River.](image-url)
professionals are either working with the local government or come from universities outside Kaiping. The only professional organization with the expertise in protecting and managing Kaiping's cultural capital is the local government's Diaoliu Office, which has a staff of less than 20 people, including administrative and non-heritage-related technical staff members. The short-term solution for acquiring the necessary professional heritage management expertise for Kaiping has been in the form of advisory help by outside heritage experts, such as nearby Hong Kong and such distant places as Israel. In the long term, creating a pool of trained heritage management professionals will be critical for Kaiping as an inscribed World Heritage place. The local government seems to have recognized the importance of this necessity, and have sent a staff member of the Diaoliu Office to attend the built heritage conservation and management programme at The University of Hong Kong and to make contacts with professionals of international stature, thus making a small step in the right direction for the sustainable future of Kaiping's cultural capital.

Conclusion

Any city that aims to be successful in tapping into its cultural capital for tourism development needs to have not only sound policies in cultural development and heritage conservation, but also a practical means of financing development and post-development works. It takes investors, professionals, private citizens, and, more importantly, a visionary government to appreciate the potentials and opportunities of its city's own cultural capital as well as the risks involved, and act on them accordingly and decisively. It will take a concerted effort among stakeholders to balance the gains and sacrifices from cultural tourism in order that the community at large will benefit socio-culturally and socio-economically through many generations. This is what sustainable development for a city is about. In the words of the Getty Conservation Institute's report on Economics and Heritage Conservation 'sustainability is to ask not simply the current value but the value over a whole series of generations' (Mason 1999: 21).

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Endnotes

1 This charter was adopted by the Council of Europe and proclaimed at the Congress on the European Architectural Heritage held in Amsterdam in October 1975.

2 This refers to the Architectural Conservation Programme which the author served as the Founding Programme Director. For details of this programme, please refer to its website at http://acp.arch.hku.hk.

3 For example, Kalmen’s point on consumer pattern and tourism stimulated by cultural development and heritage conservation can be seen in his consultancy’s “Okanagan Cultural Corridor Marketing Plan: Findings Report” (2003), which is published in the following website: http://www.okanaganccorridor.com/membersdocuments/OCC-findings.pdf

4 1998 Policy Address, paragraph 124 "Promoting our Culture and Heritage.”

5 1999 Policy Address, paragraph 164 “Hong Kong’s Culture and Creativity.”

6 The two programmes at The University of Hong Kong are: the Architectural Conservation Programme (http://acp.arch.hku.hk) in the Department of Architecture, and the Cultural Heritage Management Programme (http://hkuspace.hku.hk/ah/architectural_studies/chm9) in the School of Professional and Continuing Education.

7 The author has been an advisor for the Kaiping Government on application to the World Heritage Inscription and has lead the research team and taken part in the drafting the application dossier.