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Conservation and Revitalization of a Tourism Commercialized Historic District

-- Case Study in Ciqikou Ancient Town in Chongqing

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Abstract: Historic district is a carrier of local culture and collective memory of a place. Nowadays, tourists preferred to travel to historic district, which boosts the development of tourism commercialization. As a result, tourism commercialization and commoditization for tourists's experience came into being. In the historic district, homogeneous products are common, cultural elements are being used in branding and market areas. The phenomenon of tourism commercialization in the context of China is very common, weakening the meaning of local culture. Over commercialization makes it difficult for the local residents and tourists to perceive the authenticity of urban heritage in modern society. Based on existing research results and theoretical basis, and through the case study in Ciqikou Ancient Town in Chongqing, this paper proposed advice aiming to make tourism commercialization and culture conservation coexist and thrive in the historic district.

Keywords: Ciqikou historic district; Over commercialization; Revitalization

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a spurt of progress in economic and social development in Chongqing. Chongqing located at the centre of the ancient Bayu Area and considered the birthplace of Bayu Culture, holds the distinction of being a historical and cultural city in China, with over 3,000 years of history. However, this growth has exerted detrimental influence upon its urban historic heritage, old buildings have been demolished, populations have resettled, and skyscrapers erected at a rapid pace. Consequently, the preservation and revitalization of historic districts have become increasingly urgent. Ciqikou Historic District is the core of Chongqing's national historical and cultural city conservation system.

Recent theoretical developments have revealed that planned tourism development is now widely recognized as an effective and desirable approach to protect and revitalize China's historic districts (Yang, Lu, & Wang, 2004). According to the municipal government of Chongqing, protection and revitalization of Ciqikou Historic District should be promoted with planned tourism (Qiu, 2017).

1. Literature Review

1.1 Tourism in historic district

Historic districts are areas of historical and cultural conservation that reflect traditional characteristics, which include social, economic, cultural features, lifestyles, as well as local features rooted in the historical period (Yang, Lu, & Wang, 2004). As a significant component of Chinese cultural heritage, historic districts enjoy a profound historic connotation for preserving and presenting traditional Chinese culture and history (Lu et al, 2015). In China, tourism development in historic districts started in 1990s and is considered as an effective strategy to revitalizing those areas (Liu & Liu, 2010). Tourism in historic districts allows tourists to directly experience cultural landscapes, performances, local cuisine, handicrafts, and cultural activities of the past and present, it also boosts the development of local culture and expands the seasonal and geographic sphere of the general tourism (Richards, 1994, 1996). Visiting historic districts has been considered as one of the most grateful activities among tourists (Hargrove, 2002), which reveals the reason why tourism in historic district is among the fastest growing tourism niche markets. Due to the increased level of income, leisure time and the mobility among population, tourism is now widely considered as a growth industry, generating heritage awareness (QIAN, 2007). It is agreed that cultural tourism will involve combining cultural products from the past with the way people live today (McCartney & Chen, 2020). As a developing country with a socialist economic system, the Chinese government actively participates in the development of the tourism industry, acting as an operator, regulator and investment stimulator (Lu et al, 2015).

1.2 Tourism commercialization

Based on the commercialization of historical and cultural assets, heritage tourism is essentially a form of tourism which can fully attract tourists.

A heritage site not only attracts visitors to experience the real past, but it also provides them with a place to entertain, relax and consume. Therefore, the development of heritage tourism inevitably encounters commercialization (Zhang et al, 2021). Although the growth and expansion of cultural tourism has stimulated the development of culture, it has also had negative impacts, and in particular the over commercialization of tourism (McCartney & Chen, 2020).

Commercialization is defined as a commercial relationship built around tourism products and activities (Zhang et al, 2021). Tourism commercialization is defined as a description in the tourism destination for certain commercial phenomenon. There are two crucial features: (a) Driven by the development of tourism, commercial functions have changed; the number of shops facing tourists accounts for a large proportion, even more than that of local residents and (b) Homogeneous products are common; ethnic handicrafts are reduced, and inferior handicrafts are mass-produced and flood the market (Sun et al, 2019). With the development of tourism in the historic districts, a unique phenomenon appears: a large number of stores, inns, and cultural products are commoditized, they are created to service and sell only to tourists. However, more and more cultural elements are being used in branding and market areas, for it can provide alternative sources of revenue for areas where traditional industries have declined, and whose communities have suffered as a result (Blešić et al, 2014). Commodification of local cultural products is the kernel of tourism commercialization. Commodification is defined as the process by which things or activities are transformed into goods or services based on their exchange value for trade (Zhang et al, 2021). There is a significant difference between the commercialization and commodification of tourism. Commodification has been interpreted as "loss of meaning", where traditional activities, rituals and symbols are affected by tourism development (Sun et al, 2019). Commodification is defined as "the transformation of things (and activities) into goods (services) in a trading environment by being evaluated primarily on the basis of their exchange value." Many studies believe that the commercialization of tourism can have a positive impact on tourists' authentic experience (Zhang et al, 2021). However, from an existential authenticity perspective, commodification not only destroys the meaning of cultural products but also destroys relationships with tourists, forcing tourists to seek authenticity from remote areas. Commodification is thus a process of valuing the exchange value of natives through money. It means that the meaning of local culture is weakened, lost and reconstructed. The kernel of commodification is the local culture. However, tourism commercialization, as a form of spatial environment, is not only related to the commercialization of culture, but also includes the homogenization of destinations and large-scale service product. Previous studies have shown that tourism commercialization, as an external phenomenon, has a negative impact on the cultural environment (Sun et al, 2019), and it can bring several impacts on local tourism destination, such as changing the lifestyle of local residents (Bao & Su, 2004; Wu et al., 2015), confusing the perceived authenticity of historic districts, and even reducing tourists' experience and satisfaction.

Commercialization, to a certain extent, hinders the willingness of tourists to visit minority villages. The scale of tourism is constantly changing the local social value system, and the value transformation and exchange of traditional culture, rituals, clothing and handicrafts further intensifies the commercialization of tourism. Commercialization of historic tourist district has always been a hot spot in China. It is worth noting that the concept of tourism commercialization in the Chinese context has gone beyond the original intention of commercialization. Under oriental culture and based on the commodification in destinations, commercialization is a spatial agglomeration phenomenon that mostly existing in ethnic villages or historic district where flooded with plentiful service products (Sun et al, 2019). As one of the bases of the development in one's country, culture enhances the quality of living of every individual. Tourism and conservation in a culture-rich historic district like Ciqikou allows culture to flourish and be protected, but in some cases the absence of regulatory practices gradually fade the local culture in people's memory (Estacio, 2022).

2. Research methods

2.1 Information collection

Definition of historic district, tourism commercialization and conservation, and relevant background knowledge about the Ciqikou historic district will be obtained and sorted into a comprehensive literature review. Find out the fact that they are related and whether they influence each other.

2.2 Case study

Search for existing theoretical studies and fundamentals, search and read relevant news, literature, journals and published articles about Ciqikou Ancient Town, integrate and compare the information obtained. Suggestions on the conservation and revitalization of Ciqikou are put forward based on the existing theories obtained from the literature review.

3. Results

The continuous heating up of tourism in historic district not only stimulates the local economic development, but also changes the traditional life of historic district's living and cultural form. Commercialization is the inevitable result of the tourism development in historic district, which promotes the prosperity of the tourism. However, the extreme expansion of production and the accumulation of commodities have resulted in the industrial pattern of new business forms as the development mode. Tourism commercialization is an inevitable phenomenon in the process of tourism development. The commercialization of tourism in Ciqikou Ancient Town can promote economic development in Chongqing, and make the traditional features and

characteristics of historic district fade as well. In the tourism over commercialization, historic districts are simply treated as the object of tourism economic development, overemphasize their economic functions, unilaterally pursue economic benefits, and adopt an open rather than circular tourism economic mode of transitional development. These are all the triggers that can make local Bayu culture gradually fade out of people's lives. Ciqikou Ancient Town's change of spatial structure and the change of cultural form are simultaneous, the dissolution of the traditional spatial structure makes the life function of the ancient town degenerate and the commercial function more prominent. Meanwhile, it also makes the positive significance of commercialization deconstructed and gradually falls into the development trap formed by over commercialization. For the conservation and revitalization of historic district's cultural tourism, finding out the main factors that restrict Ciqikou's development and explore the countermeasures to get rid of the predicament of over commercialization are of great importance, not only for Ciqikou in Chongqing, but also for the whole world.

4. Discussion

This paper sets out to find out the method to reasonably control the development of commercialization, realizing tourism and historic district's revitalization complement each other. Tourism in historic districts allows tourists to directly experience cultural landscapes, performances, local cuisine, handicrafts, and cultural activities of the past and present. Although the growth and expansion of cultural tourism has stimulated the development of culture of Ciqikou, it has also had negative impacts, and in particular the over commercialization of tourism. The kernel of tourism commercialization is commodification of local cultural products, which means traditional activities, rituals and symbols are affected by tourism development. Commodification not only destroys the meaning of cultural products but also destroys relationships between historic district and tourists, forcing tourists to seek authenticity from remote areas. We need authenticity to improve tourism in historic district. It significantly improves the quality of heritage tourism, which in turn increases tourists' perceived value and satisfaction. Currently, China's experience in efforts to increase investment in historic district has been problematic. It overemphasizes tourism-led economic growth and neglects local community services, it either precludes a suitable modern use for the historic building or it includes too many of them. Overall, this paper accentuates the importance of preventing over commercialization and authenticity in tourism development, which will be intended to facilitate the conservation and revitalization of historic district.

What's more, the limitations embedded in the paper need to be articulated. Data were collected from one historic district located in Ciqikou Ancient Town; therefore the generalizability of the findings can be a problem.

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