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## **Tourists' Perceptions of Authenticity: the Case of Heritage Experiences in Hong Kong**

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### **Introduction**

Heritage tourism is one of the most notable and widespread types of tourism, in terms of visitors and attractions, drawing hundreds of millions of visitors every year (Timothy and Boyd, 2006). In the urban tourist destination of Hong Kong, heritage tourism is only a secondary or tertiary tourist attraction. Nevertheless, there is a growing concern for developing heritage tourism. The idea of heritage in Hong Kong has been established since the 1980s in recognising the process by which the former Chinese fishing village was transformed from the mid-nineteenth century into a metropolitan city (Cheung, 1999). Recently, heritage was identified as one of the key options in order to pursue a long-term strategy for tourism development (Ho and McKercher, 2004; Hong Kong Planning Department, 2012).

Due to the rapid transformation of Hong Kong since the 1980s, together with the strong commodification of tourist assets, heritage sites in the city have been reconstructed on various levels. In a study of cultural attractions in Hong Kong, the curators and managers of these assets, not only showed no objections towards commodification, but also acknowledged commodification as an essential means to manage increasing visitor numbers (McKercher, Ho and du Cros, 2004). However, it is commonly suggested that the process of commoditising cultural and heritage assets for tourism purpose results in a loss of authenticity (Cohen, 1988; Finn, 2009; Goulding, 2000; Greenwood, 1977; Halewood and Hannam, 2001; MacCannell, 1973; Shepherd, 2002; Watson and Kopachevsky, 1994).

The topic of authenticity and the tourist search for authentic experiences have been the subjects of a heated debate since the 1960s. A number of studies have indicated that tourists have different preferences related to authenticity. Hence, they seek different types of authentic experiences (Chhabra, Healy and Sills, 2003; Chhabra, 2010; Moscardo and Pearce, 1999; Pearce and Moscardo, 1986; Silver, 1993; Waitt, 2000). The three major views of authenticity which have been discussed in literature are objectivism, constructivism and existentialism

This is a pre-print version of a book chapter in P. Porananond and V. T. King (eds), *Rethinking Asian Tourism: Culture, Encounters and Local Response* (pp. 71-94). UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (Chhabra, 2012; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Wang, 1999). From the management and marketing point of view, it is essential that we should comprehend how tourists understand the concept of authenticity and to recognise whether they acknowledge the authenticity claimed for a site or event (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Xie and Wall, 2002).

In developing the theme of authenticity we believe that in the context of Hong Kong heritage tourism it is a vital topic for investigation. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine tourist perceptions of authenticity with regard to Hong Kong heritage tourism experiences and the factors that affect these perceptions.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Authenticity in Tourism***

The concept of authenticity is claimed to have been originally used in a museum context (Trilling, 1972, cited in Wang, 1999); it was then extended to various tourism products and is currently commonly used as an important marketing and selling point. In a tourism context, authenticity refers specifically to traditional culture and origin, relating to a sense of realness, genuineness and uniqueness (Sharpley, 1994) and to issues of identity (Lanfant, 1995; MacDonald, 1997; Picard, 1997). Authenticity is also defined as being associated with the presentation of the past in an accurate manner (Timothy and Boyd, 2003).

The literature demonstrates divergent opinions on perceiving authenticity. Generally there are two research directions concerning the meaning of authenticity. Some scholars consider authenticity as intrinsic to the objects so designated, whilst others suggest that authenticity lies in tourist perceptions or experiences (Timothy, 2011). Wang (1999) contended that the concept of authenticity should be divided into separate issues, which are often confused: *tourist experiences* and *toured objects*. This idea arose from the previous concepts of 'real world' and 'real self' proposed by Handler and Saxton (1988); and 'authenticity as knowledge' ('cool' authenticity) and 'authenticity as feeling' ('hot' authenticity) by Selwyn (1996) (as cited in Wang, 1999). According to Wang (1999), it is not correct to conclude that the 'authenticity as feeling' from the 'real self' has emerged from 'authenticity as knowledge' or from the 'real world'. The 'real self' can have no relationship with the 'real world'. Nonetheless, one could

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experience authenticity either by knowledge/real world or feeling/real self or both. In other words, objects and tourist perceptions are both used to perceive authenticity, yet one can be stronger than the other. Indeed, the concept of authenticity is often considered to be negotiable (Cohen, 1988), and therefore different perspectives of authenticity exist. The three most widely discussed and acknowledged are 'objective', 'constructed' and 'existential' authenticity.

Objectivist and constructivist approaches are the two conventional conceptions of authenticity. Objective authenticity is based on 'pseudo-events' as described by Boorstin and 'staged authenticity' as examined by MacCannell (Wang, 1999). This museum-linked view refers to the pure, original, genuine version of the objects (Chhabra, 2012; Wang, 1999). The objectivists contend that authenticity is an obvious feature of sites and objects and that it can be measured by certain criteria (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). When tourists search for authenticity in this sense, then an inauthentic experience results from an inauthentic object (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). This conceptualisation of authenticity, however, is based on knowledge of the object and falls within the arena of experts, intellectuals and members of the elite and is not applicable to mass tourists (Wang, 1999). Reisinger and Steiner (2006) even suggest abandoning the concept of objective authenticity because they believe there is no common ground for its existence and meaning. Nonetheless, an empirical study of student perceptions of authenticity by Chhabra (2010) revealed that the demand for objective authenticity does exist and continues to prevail.

Meanwhile, constructivists see the 'real world' as the result of interpretations and constructions (Schwandt, 1994). A constructivist approach therefore addresses the complex and constructed nature of authenticity within the context of the influence of capitalism and commercialisation (Britton, 1991; Chhabra, 2012; Finn, 2009; Goulding, 2000; Wang, 1999). The constructivist approach implies that the object is comprehended by tourist interpretations and their knowledge of it; and that the authenticity of the object is constructed by perspectives, beliefs, and expectations. Wang (1999) has summarised the common elements of this school of thought as follows: (1) the refusal to accept the notion of absolute authenticity; (2) the premise that origins and traditions are invented according to certain contexts; (3) the view that authenticity is a pluralistic concept, dependent on tourist perspectives and interpretations; (4) the position that authenticity is associated with stereotypes and the expectations of the societies from which tourists derive; and, (5) the claim that the authenticity of objects can emerge over time even if its origins are artificial. Subsequently, it is argued that tourists indeed search for authenticity.

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However, they do not search for objective authenticity but rather symbolic authenticity, which results from the process of social construction (Wang, 1999).

These conventional concepts of authenticity which are influenced by objectivist and constructivist approaches are directly relevant and important for several types of tourism connected with the past, such as culture, heritage, historical and ethnic tourism (Wang, 1999). However, they are claimed to be 'too simple' for explicating contemporary tourism (Urry, 1990; and Britton, 1991). Some modes of travel are believed to be inappropriate for using the conventional concept of authenticity, such as visiting friends and relatives, beach holidays, nature-based tourism, shopping tourism, sports tourism, and so on. Using another perception of the concept, Wang (1999) has proposed the notion of existential authenticity. In fact, many other scholars have questioned the conventional concepts of authenticity which are mainly associated with toured objects (Wang, 1999).

Existential authenticity advocates subjective versions of authenticity which might be irrelevant to the realness of the toured objects (Chhabra, 2012; Wang, 1999). It denotes one's state of mind and perceptions, existential state of being, and self-discovery (ibid). Accordingly, tourists are mostly searching for their authentic selves by travelling, experiencing activities and toured objects (Wang, 1999). The toured object is irrelevant or less relevant in informing an authentic experience as it is only a medium by which one finds existential authenticity. Although this perception of authenticity is claimed to explain authenticity for certain types of tourism (nature, beach, cruising, visiting friends and relatives), it may also be applicable to cultural and heritage tourism, particularly in that tourists do not necessarily visit cultural and heritage sites because of the sites themselves but for other reasons, i.e. convenience or accompanying their friends or family.

### ***Tourist Perceptions of Authenticity***

The topic of tourists and their search for authentic places and experiences have been the subject of discussion in tourism studies since the 1960s (Timothy, 2011). Principally, there are two contrasting points of view, namely (1) tourists are not concerned about the authenticity of the places they visit, and (2) tourists really look for authentic experiences and places. One of the earliest ideas of authenticity presented by Boorstin in 1961 contended that tourists are not

concerned about the authenticity of the places they visit or the experiences they have, but their purposes for travelling are mainly for fun and entertainment (as cited in Timothy, 2011). Boorstin also argued that touristic places are often inauthentic and fabricated for tourists; and that tourists actually seek this kind of inauthentic experience. Urry (1990) claimed that tourists even prefer spurious places which give them unreal experiences and do not require mindfulness, thoughtfulness or effort even if they are able to recognise real or unreal heritage places.

MacCannell indicated that tourists in fact looked for authenticity, however, they were not able to identify it. He then proposed the concept of 'staged authenticity', where everything is set up for the consumption of tourists (MacCannell, 1973). The terms 'front stage' and 'back stage' are used to clarify the concept of 'staged authenticity'. The 'front stage' where tourists often visit, is disposed to present local cultures to tourists, while real local life is in the 'back stage' (Timothy, 2011). Tourists therefore only experience the performed or staged culture.

From these seminal discussions of authenticity, many other scholars have contributed to these debates. For example, Moscardo and Pearce (1986) concluded from their research on Australian historic theme parks that authenticity is important for tourist choices to visit places and that authenticity is often promoted as a part of the visitors' experiences. Herbert (1995) was particularly interested in authenticity when discussing issues of heritage as 'literary place'. He argued that 'some visitors, though probably a small minority, are extremely interested in the authenticity of the site and are likely to be disappointed if things are not "real"' (ibid: 45). Timothy (2011) has also proposed that tourists might not be looking for fabricated experiences in that they are in fact blinded by previous stereotypes or false images. In this case, tourist perception of what is authentic is actually not a real and authentic experience, because what they think they are searching for is in fact not genuine.

In sum, the importance of authenticity differs among different types of tourists. There are tourists who search for authentic places and have a desire for authentic experiences; whilst others are not concerned about authenticity and simply wish to experience fun and relax. Different levels of authenticity can be identified in the toured object, ranging from the genuine to the totally fabricated. Subsequently, tourists may perceive authenticity in their own ways and from their own perspectives.

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In fact, a considerable amount of research has been undertaken on the theme of authenticity from the tourist perspective through empirical studies (see Budruk, White, Wodrich and van Riper, 2008; Chhabra, 2010; Chhabra, Healy and Sills, 2003; Cole, 2007; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; McIntosh and Prentice, 1999; Moscardo and Pearce, 1986; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Robinson and Clifford, 2012; Waitt, 2000; Waller and Lea, 1998). Some of these studies indicate that tourists have different preferences related to authenticity and seek different types of authentic experiences (Chhabra, 2010; Moscardo and Pearce, 1999; Silver, 1993; Waitt, 2000). Authenticity is therefore seen as a negotiable concept (Cohen, 1988).

Indeed, people perceive authenticity differently and, sometimes even ambiguously. This means that an object could be judged as inauthentic by experts or elites, but be perceived as authentic by some tourists. Therefore, from the management and marketing stand point, it is crucial to understand authenticity from tourist perceptions (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Xie and Wall, 2002). Especially when various perceptions towards authenticity are defined, an investigation of these points of view is essential.

The three prominent views indicated above present different tourist perceptions towards authenticity. In a heritage tourism context, tourists vary from what might be termed 'serious' to 'accidental' tourists, and their heritage experiences range from enjoying their real self to learning from the real world. Previous studies have shown that a range of perceptions of authenticity are associated with certain visitor characteristics such as age, stage of career, tourism style (Littrell, Anderson and Brown, 1993), gender, place of residence, stage of lifecycle (Waitt, 2000), education, mode of travel (Chang, Wall and Chang, 2008), visitor motivation, place identity, educational attainment, and previous experiences (Budruk, White, Wodrich, van Riper, 2008). In addition, perceived authenticity should be understood as linking tourist motivation to future behaviours (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). Perceived authenticity is also an important factor in tourist satisfaction, enjoyment and loyalty (Chhabra, 2010; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010; Pearce and Moscardo, 1986; Waller and Lea, 1998).

### **Study Sites**

Hong Kong is commonly known as an urban tourism destination, which offers a spectacular skyline view, diverse shopping and recreation facilities, and a special mixture of Chinese and

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British culture. This cosmopolitan metropolis attracts millions of visitors a year, and in 2011 recorded almost 42 million tourists (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2012). Recently, the Hong Kong Government has paid more attention to widening the range of tourist experiences and to diversifying tourist attractions in order to attract new visitors, keep them staying longer and encouraging repeat visits (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2012). The focus for long-term tourism development is on ecotourism and cultural tourism (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2012). In cultural tourism, special attention is given to arts, culture and heritage attractions (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2012).

In Hong Kong, the concept of heritage has been developed from the 1980s with an emphasis on Hong Kong's Chinese culture and history (Cheung, 1999). But the British colonial period has also left Hong Kong with special Western features. It is the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures, the tradition and the modern, which gives Hong Kong a distinct image of 'East meets West'. Although heritage tourism has never been a primary tourist attraction of Hong Kong, the local government has put great efforts into expanding this type of tourism to locals as well as foreign tourists. Different heritage trails have been established and promoted since 1993, of which the Ping Shan Heritage Trail in the New Territories is the first. Also, the Lung Yeuk Tau Heritage Trail and the Central and Western Heritage Trail with three different routes present the special Chinese and British features of Hong Kong. These trails have been well-visited by both local and international visitors (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2012). Recently, a large-scale exhibition entitled 'Hong Kong Heritage Tourism Expo - Access Heritage' was held from December 2010 to November 2011 in different places, promoting six specially designed heritage tour routes (Commissioner for Heritage's Office, 2013).

There are a total of 101 declared monuments and more than one thousand historic buildings in Hong Kong (Antiquities and Monuments Office, 2013), including a wide range of Chinese tangible and intangible heritage (such as temples, festivals and villages) and British colonial heritage/ historic buildings. Nonetheless, only a few of these heritage sites are able to attract tourists. A study by McKercher, Ho and du Cros (2004) indicated more than half out of nearly 100 declared monuments and museums promoted by the Hong Kong Tourism Board recorded no visitors at all.

In this study, in order to achieve the proposed objectives of investigating tourist perceptions, the chosen heritage attractions should not only have cultural and/or historical value but also a significant number of visitors. From the review of literature and our own visits to sites, six different heritage attractions were chosen for this study (see Table 1). The primary data of the study were mainly collected by semi-structured interviews. This approach provided the opportunity to obtain relevant information on the main topics of interest, but also enabled the respondents to express their thoughts and stories spontaneously. It is particularly appropriate in a study in which the perceptions of tourists are investigated. Accordingly, a list of open-ended questions was prepared in advance to gather information about tourist motivation in visiting the sites, their awareness of the sites, their satisfaction with the visits, and most importantly, their perceptions towards the authenticity of heritage experiences. Also, new or follow-up issues were brought up during the interviews on a case-by-case basis and the order of the questions was flexible.

**Table 1: Description of the Heritage Attractions**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Wong Tai Sin Temple</b>	Home to three religions: Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. This is one of the most famous temples in Hong Kong and an important religious centre where local worshippers pray for good fortune. It has also become a very popular tourist attraction with shops and fortune-teller services.
<b>Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery</b>	This is a Buddhist temple, located on a hill in the Pai Tau Village, Sha Tin. There are about 13,000 statues of the Buddha, spreading from the gates at the bottom of the hill up to the main temple.
<b>Man Mo Temple</b>	Built in 1847, the temple is dedicated to two gods, Man Cheong, the God of Literature and Kwan Yu, the God of Martial Arts. This temple is located in the busy Central District of Hong Kong Island. It is a popular and esteemed religious site for locals.
<b>Ping Shan Heritage Trail</b>	Introduced in December 1993, this is the first heritage trail in Hong Kong. The district of Ping Shan has a long history with the Tang clan first residing there in the twelfth century. This one kilometre trail includes numerous traditional Chinese buildings such as pagodas, ancestral halls, study halls and temples.



<b>Po Lin Monastery</b>	The monastery was founded in 1906 and is now one of Hong Kong's most important Buddhist sanctuaries. It is located in a popular cultural tourist complex, together with the Tian Tan Buddha (Big Buddha) and the Ngong Ping village on Lantau Island.
<b>Museum of Heritage</b>	The museum is located in Sha Tin. It provides a wide selection of exhibitions and activities with a mix of history, culture and arts of early Hong Kong and the nearby South China region.

A total number of 21 interviews were carried out in April and May 2013, mostly through face-to-face dialogues at six different heritage sites in Hong Kong. Table 2 presents the basic demographic characteristics of the respondents and the heritage sites where the interviews took place, as well as the main objects of the interviews. The respondents were inbound tourists to Hong Kong, including seven short-haul tourists from Asian countries and 14 long-haul tourists from non-Asian countries. Their ages ranged from 21 to 52 years. Respondents visited Hong Kong for various reasons, from convenience (such as language, safety, close to China, and so on) to visiting friends and relatives, business and vacation.

Together with interviews, the physical settings of the heritage sites were also observed regarding the matters of authenticity, commodification and tourist activities.

**Table 2: Respondents' Information**

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Heritage site</b>
#1	China	Female	21	Wong Tai Sin temple
#2	Netherlands	Female	22	Man Mo temple
#3	Italy	Male	29	Big Buddha and Po Lin Monastery
#4	China	Male	35	Wong Tai Sin temple
#5	Finland	Female	31	Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery and Po Lin Monastery
#6	China	Male	42	Po Lin Monastery
#7	Poland	Female	25	Wong Tai Sin temple
#8	Spain	Male	29	Wong Tai Sin temple
#9	Spain	Male	28	Po Lin Monastery
#10	China	Male	34	Po Lin Monastery
#11	France	Female	52	Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery and Man Mo temple
#12	Russia	Female	24	Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery
#13	Poland	Female	26	Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery and Ping Shan Heritage Trail
#14	Poland	Male	26	Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery and Ping Shan Heritage Trail
#15	Vietnam	Female	28	Museum of History
#16	Vietnam	Male	30	Po Lin monastery
#17	Canada	Female	25	Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery
#18	Canada	Female	25	Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery
#19	France	Male	27	Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery
#20	France	Female	27	Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery
#21	Vietnam	Female	26	Man Mo temple and Wong Tai Sin Temple

## **Findings**

### ***Tourist Visits to Hong Kong Heritage Attractions***

Half of the non-Asian respondents followed the recommendation from guidebooks to visit these heritage attractions. This fact confirms the important role of guidebooks in the tourist decision

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making process (Lew, 1991), especially for long-haul tourists who are not so familiar with the destination. For most Asian tourists, religion was the primary or secondary purpose of the visits as almost all surveyed attractions are religious sites. Word-of-mouth, specifically recommendations from friends and relatives, was also an important reason for the respondents when choosing the attractions. Nevertheless, almost all respondents claimed their heritage interests extend from travelling in general to the visit to Hong Kong in particular. Hence, the ultimate reason for visiting these attractions has been found to be acquiring knowledge about Hong Kong and learning about the local cultures and customs.

Even for a Chinese tourist who was not new to Hong Kong, the contemporary local customs appeared to be interesting: *'I like to experience what local people experience. I want to see, I want to do what they do'*. Since Hong Kong is overwhelmed with modern architecture and lifestyle, heritage and its atmosphere which present *'another side of the city'* was another point of interest for many respondents. For example, tourists stated that: *'Now you just see high buildings, it's new and it's impersonal. It doesn't give me the feeling about the people, it's just large and concrete. Heritage is completely different, the atmosphere and everything around. For me, I feel more comfortable with this kind of surrounding'*. Or: *'I try to understand how life was in the old days [in Hong Kong], how people worked ... Because now it is so different, huge buildings, modern life'*. For the sites that are located in suburban or mountain areas (Po Lin Monastery/the Big Buddha, Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery), escaping from the city was also an important reason for the visits.

Many of the long-haul tourists were first time visitors to Hong Kong, some were even first time visitors to Asia. Therefore, their knowledge about Hong Kong and Chinese culture was limited. The main source of information about the sites for most respondents was a guidebook. The information they had, however, was rather superficial, in that it mainly related to where to go and what to see. For instance, tourists said *'I only heard that it is a nice place to go'* or *'I saw few pictures, I saw it was big enough to have something interesting'*. On the other hand, there were tourists who not only had read about the history of the heritage sites but also had previous experiences about Asia as well as Chinese culture. It is the difference between these two groups that has resulted in different perspectives towards heritage experiences.

With the purpose of learning about local cultures and customs, tourists spent around two or three hours at the attractions, mainly for sightseeing and taking photographs. Only some short-haul tourists, who came also for religious purposes, spent some more time praying for good fortune. However, there were tourists who had the chance to interact with locals and this was found to make their visits more exciting. A tourist shared her story: *'We went in, we saw people praying. I was wondering what people were doing. So I asked a person how it worked with the candles, praying and stuff. He told me you had to offer something and you prayed for something good. Then we walk around, I burned a candle as well. And that was really nice'*.

In general, the respondents had a positive impression of the visited sites, especially towards their appearance and structural design. All respondents appreciated the aesthetic aspect of the heritage attractions in Hong Kong. The words *'beautiful'* and *'impressive'* were mentioned frequently when tourists were asked about their impression of the visited sites.

### ***Tourist Perceptions of Authenticity***

Tourists were asked to assess the authenticity of their heritage experiences in the surveyed sites. Experiences in three studied sites (Man Mo Temple, Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery and Ping Shan Heritage Trail) were perceived as rather authentic. Experiences in the other three attractions (Wong Tai Sin Temple, Po Lin Monastery, and Museum of History) were not so authentic according to the respondents' perceptions. In order to understand the reasons behind this, tourists' explanations of their assessments were analysed and classified into enhancers and diminishers of perceived authenticity. Enhancers of authenticity are understood as elements that increase the perceived authenticity of the heritage experiences, whereas, diminishers are factors that lessen the perceived authenticity of heritage experiences.

### ***Enhancers of Perceived Authenticity***

Table 3 shows eight categories of perceived authenticity enhancers, arranged in the order of frequency of occurrence. The first two categories (appearance of the site and the presence of local culture) were the most common reasons for tourists having stronger perceptions of authenticity.

**Table 3: Enhancers of Perceived Authenticity**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Properties</b>
<b>Appearance</b>	Age (i.e. old) Ruin/ Desolation Original/ no modification
<b>Local culture/custom</b>	Presence of monks/religious practitioners Presence of local people Used by locals for original purposes Interactions with locals
<b>Novelty</b>	Lack of knowledge about the site Different culture, custom Discovery
<b>Senses</b>	Smell of incense Sound of praying
<b>Location</b>	Local residential surroundings Historic/original location
<b>Accessibility</b>	Necessity of efforts to access
<b>Atmosphere</b>	Spirituality
<b>Authority</b>	Government involvement

According to most respondents, the site appeared to be authentic if it looked old or even in ruins. Heritage is typically understood as the legacy from the past, hence logically, it should have the appearance of age. Authenticity was also found to have the meaning of ‘original’ that is with no perceived modifications. The presence of local culture and custom which is represented by local residents is another discovered essential factor of authenticity. As stated by the respondents, it was the presence of the monks in the monasteries and the locals who were praying in the temples that made their experiences authentic. Moreover, a tourist claimed to have an extremely authentic temple experience when she was instructed by a local worshipper.

Another visitor said: *‘When I went to Taiwan, I have a local friend there and I think it’s more authentic when I went for lunch with her and then see really old cultural attractions. It is a really authentic thing to do’*. Hence, the interactions with locals are also found to increase tourists’ perceived authenticity.

The third factor we discovered which made tourists' perceived authenticity higher is novelty. When tourists had either no or a limited knowledge of the site, they tended to show a higher level of perceived authenticity. Tourists, when encountering different cultures which are new to them, are usually unable to recognise what is real and what is fake. When they are impressed about what is presented then they accordingly consider it to be real and in consequence then have what they consider to be authentic experiences.

Tourists also used their senses when evaluating their experiences. Therefore, the presence of certain sounds or smells could enhance their heritage experiences and increase their perceived authenticity. Many tourists were fascinated to hear the sound of prayers and to smell the incense at the temples and monasteries. The presence of assets stimulating the senses was subsequently found to increase perceived authenticity. The opposite was found to be disappointing. A tourist commented: *'It was pretty, nice to look at, but I think I miss the smell. When I think of a temple, there is a smell in my mind'*.

In addition to original appearance, original or historical locations were mentioned as an element of authenticity. For some attractions, tourists perceived them as more authentic if they were located in a residential area and surrounded by local residents. An example was the heritage trail in Ping Shan, as the trail goes through the village lined with ancestral halls, temples, and study halls. The respondents were extremely satisfied with their related authentic experiences. On this trail, various details made tourists feel like they were having the most authentic Hong Kong heritage village experience. For example, the heritage site was found to be *'incorporated with other buildings [residents, houses], it's something different from a usual heritage, with fences and guards. It is still in use for daily lives'*. So tourists could *'see how people spend their time with family, gathering and praying together'*.

Necessity of efforts to get access to the sites, and the spiritual atmosphere were also noted as possible enhancers of perceived authenticity. One tourist who had *'suffered'* climbing up a hill when visiting the Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery, believed this effort contributed to her authentic experience. She said that *'it is so difficult to come here. I don't think people would have built this kind of temple if it was not in the old times'*.

As most of the surveyed attractions were religious sites, also the spiritual atmosphere prevailed in the sites as an essential element of authenticity. Lastly and most interestingly, a tourist from China believed that the involvement of the authorities in the construction of the heritage site made it authentic. It is rather uncommon to see that, even if the site is known to be constructed, it is still considered as authentic. However, in this case, it might be the trust in the authority of the government that determines the perception of authenticity.

### *Diminishers of Perceived Authenticity*

The five categories of authenticity diminishers are summarised in Table 4.

**Table 4: Diminishers of perceived authenticity**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Properties</b>
<b>Commodification/ Tourist facilities</b>	Construction for tourism purposes Overcrowding Shops, restaurants Attraction park/ <i>Disneyfication</i> Commercialisation
<b>Physical setting</b>	Artificial elements Modern elements New/ freshly built appearance Presence of certain building material (i.e. concrete)
<b>Over-management</b>	Over-maintenance (i.e. too well-maintained) Over-cleanliness (i.e. too clean) Professional staff
<b>Previous experiences</b>	Comparison with previous experiences/knowledge
<b>Surroundings</b>	Modern surroundings Unrelated surroundings (i.e. non-religious)

When inauthenticity assessment occurred, one topic which was always repeated was commodification. The presence of shops, restaurants and other tourist facilities was found to

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reduce the authenticity of a heritage experience. The case of a tourist visiting Po Lin Monastery is an example: *'When I was at the Big Buddha and the Monastery, I saw tourists, shops, Starbucks... That is the main reason that makes me feel it is not authentic... When this kind of attraction is surrounded by shops and touristic facilities it takes away the authenticity'*. The high density of these tourist facilities also creates the image of a tourism-purpose-built attraction, hence it can destroy the authentic heritage experience. Also with the case of Po Lin Monastery and its tourism complex, a tourist stated: *'You walk through the place and you see that everything is for tourists. It feels like it was built for tourists'*.

In the case of the Wong Tai Sin Temple, the commercialised elements were also a significant diminisher. A tourist commented: *'The biggest impression in Wong Tai Sin that I have is that there was a big area for fortune tellers. It was too organised, on a large scale. They made a separate area for fortune tellers, it looks so professional. It lost the feeling of fortune tellers or a temple. It seems like a business, too commercialised'*.

Nonetheless, the presence of tourists seemed not to be an issue when the number was moderate. Indeed, the respondents were tourists, hence obviously they accepted the existence of tourists/themselves. But when there were too many tourists, the overcrowding tended to weaken the authentic experiences.

In addition to the commodification factors, the physical setting or appearance of the heritage sites was another essential focus when assessing authenticity. When old is authentic, as discussed in the enhancers, understandably, new/modern/fresh is considered as inauthentic. A tourist when seeing the zodiac statues in Wong Tai Sin Temple stated that: *'From my perspective, it seems all pretty fresh. That's why I don't have an authentic feeling'*. The relatively new appearance also made tourists suspicious about the real purpose of the heritage site. A tourist commented on the statues of the Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery: *'It does look a little bit new, maybe it has been developed for tourists'*.

Also, the obvious appearance of concrete in a temple construction was found to decrease perceived authenticity. Artificial elements added to the heritage sites were disappointing for tourists and reduced their authentic experience. According to a tourist who was visiting Wong Tai Sin Temple, the temple itself was acknowledged as real and original. Yet the artificial



elements such as sculptures and decorations, commercial shops, and a modern logo gave her an inauthentic experience of the temple visit.

The third diminisher is related to the management system of the heritage sites. Commonly, the better the management system, the better the service quality and the tourist experience. However, in the case of over-management, such as a site being too well-maintained and too clean with professional staff then these factors reduced the perceived authenticity. This finding can be associated with the previous positive concept of authenticity that heritage sites should be old or ruined. Therefore, when they are perceived as too nice and too clean, then they are not authentic heritage sites. In the Wong Tai Sin Temple, a tourist said: *'In these kinds of places in China, you see monks or religious persons in the surroundings. But here, there are security people or other people who are working here. There is the guy who removes the ashes with gloves and an orange t-shirt. It's just so strict, organised, planned'*.

While lack of information could increase perceived authenticity, as discussed in the enhancer factors, possession of knowledge from previous experiences or readings potentially diminishes perceived authenticity. Respondents compared their visits to their previous experiences, ultimately being more demanding with the current experiences. Many tourists reflected on their experiences in other heritage attractions in Asia such as in China, Malaysia, and Thailand. For example, a tourist commented: *'I have been to a really large temple before in Penang, Malaysia. My feelings or impressions of the temple there and here are really different. I really felt inspired by the atmosphere in the other temple. Penang was really spiritual. It's different from here. The feeling that I had is different. I could feel in the air that it is different. For me, here it is just a touristic site'*. Or: *'I went to Thailand a few months ago and comparing this to places in Thailand, it just doesn't feel like an ancient ruin or anything similar'*.

Lastly, modern surroundings were indicated as a diminisher of perceived authenticity. As heritage experiences were investigated, modern elements including the surroundings were contended to damage the genuineness of the experience. Moreover, in the case of religious sites, the presence of non-religious surroundings made the experiences less authentic. This factor together with the over-management issue was particularly remarked in the case of Hong Kong, where modern elements are dominant and the management system is precise and stringent.

### ***The Significance of Authenticity***

As we have stated in relation to previous literature, authenticity plays different roles among different tourists or tourists have different preferences related to authenticity. This study has presented similar findings, in the sense that authenticity was not always a concern for all tourists. In any case a number of tourists were of the view that authenticity was of importance and said that they were really looking for authentic experiences. One tourist stated that: *'It [authenticity] is important for me, I want to have an authentic experience. I really work hard to find it, I will not leave the place until I get my authentic experience'*. Meanwhile, for tourists who travel for the purpose of fun and relaxation, having an authentic experience or not is a minor issue. For instance, there were such comments as: *'It doesn't need to be authentic to be enjoyed'* or *'Although we know it's not authentic, it's just something to see. We are on vacation, so it is not very bad'*. Others considered aesthetics and novelty as more important than authenticity. With a similar outcome, a study by Mkono (2013) indicates that for African tourists, aesthetics and artistry are more meaningful criteria than authenticity in evaluating cultural performances. Interestingly, some respondents were found to tolerate modifications of the site. Tourists acknowledge that due to the original building material, *'this kind of temple has to be reconstructed by copying the original. So, I don't expect a 100 per cent original'*. However, they expected to see the original idea, the impression of history, or the right value, and the right message conveyed in their experiences.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to scrutinise tourist perceptions of authenticity towards Hong Kong heritage tourism experiences and the factors that affect their perceptions. The findings indicated the existence of a heritage tourism demand among tourists visiting Hong Kong. However, most heritage experiences were rather superficial, typically based on sightseeing for long-haul tourists and religious reasons for short-haul tourists. Tourists were found to be quite impressed by architecture or the aesthetic aspects of Hong Kong heritage attractions.

Regarding the perceived authenticity of these experiences, half were not considered as authentic. However, most of the respondents were overall satisfied with their visits. This study

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also indicates that authenticity is not always a concern for all tourists, as aesthetics, novelty or relaxation was of major interest for some. Having said this authenticity is still found to be an essential component of heritage experiences for certain groups of tourists.

The results of this study also suggest different enhancers and diminishers of perceived authenticity. The enhancers include the old appearance of the sites, the presence of local culture, the lack of information, the presence of certain senses, the original location, the necessity of efforts to access a site, the spiritual atmosphere, and the kind of government involvement. The common diminishers were found to be commodification or the existence of tourist facilities, the modern/new elements in physical settings, over-management, previous experience and modern surroundings. Among these factors, appearance or physical settings of the attractions are found to be important when assessing authenticity. Accordingly, the first sight is discovered as vital for the evaluation. Besides, the involvement of local residents and religious practitioners tends to have positive impacts on tourists' authentic experiences. The excessive involvement of the authorities in terms of modifying and maintaining the attractions were found potentially to damage the authenticity of the attractions. Knowing that tourists would need certain facilities and comfort, development has to be taken with care as too much of this effort would destroy the authentic image of heritage assets. Subsequently, finding a balance is essential. A division into zones as is commonly found in ecotourism or world heritage sites could be an idea for dealing with this issue. This preliminary mapping of enhancers and diminishers of perceived authenticity in heritage tourism experiences also needs to be further developed and confirmed in other contexts, especially in destinations where heritage tourism is a major attraction. It would subsequently be helpful for the government and other authorities to improve the management of heritage sites and enhance positive tourist experiences.

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