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Towards More Authentic Heritage Destination Experiences

Xiaoxiao Fu

University of Central Florida, xiaoxiao.fu@ucf.edu

Xiaoli Yi

Jinan University

Vera Shanshan Lin

Zhejiang University

Honggen Xiao

Hong Kong Polytechnic University



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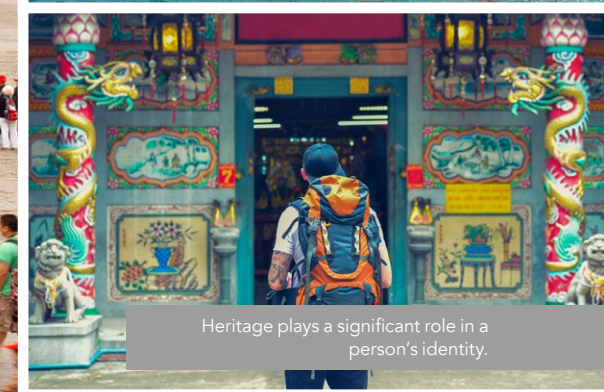
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TOWARDS MORE AUTHENTIC HERITAGE DESTINATION EXPERIENCES



Heritage destinations have a significant responsibility to visitors.



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Heritage destinations have a significant responsibility to visitors. In countries like China, where heritage plays a significant role in a person's identity, such destinations offer visitors an opportunity to develop a deeper sense of self. For this reason, they need to be authentic, but so do the visitors. UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management researcher Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu joined a team of experts based in China to identify how the perceived authenticity of two of China's most revered heritage sites affects visitors' personal sense of authenticity, their wellbeing, and how memorable they found their visits.

Not all tourists are just out to have a 'good time.' For some, going on vacation is part of a longer, more meaningful journey to develop a richer sense of self. Their search is beyond the realm of secluded getaways offering space for quiet reflection—it is tied to notions of identity. Heritage destinations provide such opportunities, but they need to be authentic for the experience to be real and be able to fulfil the visitors' needs. Therefore, the concept of 'authenticity' in heritage destinations has attracted significant research within tourism. However, 'authenticity' is more

than an ideal related to relics and events; it is a desired sense of being for visitors. This higher level of personal authenticity has a name: existential authenticity. UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management's Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu, together with a team of experts based in China, is helping provide a clearer understanding of how this is linked to authenticity at heritage destinations, tourist wellbeing, and making experiences memorable.

Existential authenticity is rooted in the philosophy of existentialism, a philosophy which emphasizes individual freedom and the

importance of creating one's own meaning in life. It suggests that humans must confront the inherent meaninglessness of existence and make choices that reflect their own unique perspectives and experiences. For those who cannot achieve this within the confines of their daily routine and immediate environment, their path to doing so may lie in immersing themselves in heritage experiences. As a result, scholars of heritage tourism sometimes see consumers as pilgrims searching for authenticity through travel.

In China, where heritage is such a strong part of an individual's identity, destinations offering such experiences are highly popular. Tourism studies suggest that for such experiences to be meaningful and help contribute to a sense of wellbeing, they must be authentic. However, there's little research that explores the multi-faceted components of authenticity in a tourist's visit to a heritage site, and the mechanisms that tie those components to wellbeing and complete an experience by making it memorable.

THE COMPLEXITY OF AUTHENTICITY

There are essentially two categories of authenticity of interest to heritage tourism research: object- and activity-related authenticity. The first is tied to physical and cultural relics and events at destinations, and the second to how tourists interact with them. The more personal existential authenticity falls under activity-related authenticity and is broadly divided into intrapersonal authenticity—being true to oneself—and interpersonal authenticity—being true in relationships with others. Tourism scholars believe tourism can be a catalyst for both.

RECONNECTING WITH THEIR HERITAGE

Fu and her colleagues started their research by designing a conceptual framework showing the hypothesized relationship between perceived authenticity, existential authenticity, psychological wellbeing, subjective wellbeing, and memorability. They then identified two of China's most important heritage sites that tourists often visit when looking to reconnect with their heritage: West Lake, in the city of

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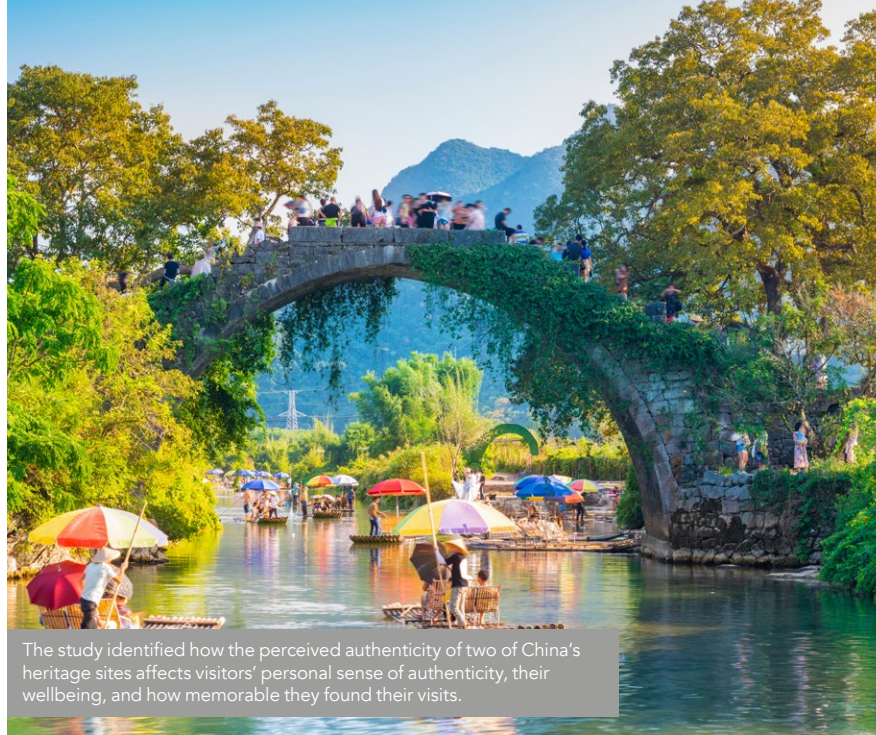
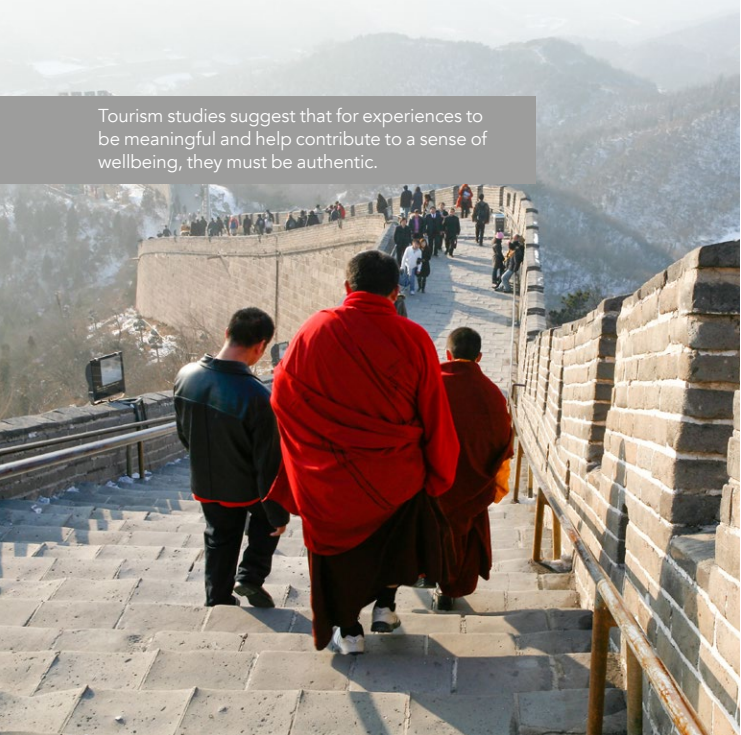
Hangzhou, and the Old Town of Lijiang in Yunnan Province. Both are UNESCO-listed world heritage destinations but with slightly different characters. West Lake is more of a landscape destination and the ancestral home of many of China's revered poets and artists

dating back to the 9th century, while Old Town is a site famous for its ancient architecture.

The researchers designed a 21-statement questionnaire with statements pertaining to each construct within their conceptual



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framework. The respondents were asked to measure each statement on a seven-point Likert-type scale. For example, on the matter of perceived authenticity, the respondents were asked to rank the tangible and intangible heritage in local architecture, paintings, inscriptions, and storytelling; to measure existential authenticity, they were asked to rate statements that measured their pursuit of self-satisfaction and the authenticity of their interactions with fellow travelers; and to measure psychological wellbeing, they ranked statements that reflected their personal growth.

The researchers received a total of 825 completed questionnaires from both sites. Most respondents were visitors from outside

TYING OTHER STUDIES TOGETHER

The data supported every one of Fu and the research team's hypotheses. It was clear that perceived authenticity positively contributed to existential authenticity; that this was significantly associated with both psychological and subjective wellbeing; that existential authenticity and psychological and subjective wellbeing all positively contributed to memorability; and, therefore, that existential authenticity and wellbeing mediate the positive relationship between perceived authenticity and memorability.

The scope of the research and the data's explicit support for the team's conceptual framework has significant theoretical implications. Most notably, the research

and experience involvement can induce long-term memories.

A MORE MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE

It's probably true that tourism destinations ultimately hope that what they provide visitors is not only experiential, but memorable. This is especially true for destinations designed to give visitors more than just 'a good time.' Destination marketers know that visitors to heritage destinations are hoping for a deeper, more meaningful experience. Such visits are akin to pilgrimages—an opportunity for visitors to learn as much about themselves as the place they are visiting. There is an intensely personal, formerly unrealized, connection to the destination that is part of their self-discovery.

For this reason, this study has considerable implications for heritage destinations. It shows, without doubt, that if heritage destinations are serious about providing such a meaningful experience, they must be committed to authenticity. Local authorities at heritage destinations must focus on maintaining the authenticity of the areas' tangible and intangible assets—experiential tourism is more than viewing buildings and landscapes; it involves personal storytelling. Furthermore, they should look for ways to develop those assets so that visitors can participate in them, as this helps tourists in their journeys of self-discovery and make their visit truly memorable. Critically, at every step of the way, their journeys—both physical and spiritual—must be authentic; their wellbeing is at stake.

THE SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH AND THE DATA'S EXPLICIT SUPPORT FOR THE TEAM'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK HAS SIGNIFICANT THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS.

the sites' areas and between the ages of 16 and 35. The latter point is noteworthy because it challenges the perception that heritage sites are mainly popular with older tourists. Using bootstrapping methods to resample the data, the researchers arrived at a quantitative assessment of their conceptual framework, and the results were overwhelming.

manages to tie together disparate focuses of individual studies within heritage tourism. It also corroborates the outcomes of other studies, such as those that show how existential travel can help tourists gain autonomy and personal growth, how tourists' experiences can be more memorable when they engage with others through activity participation, and how existential moments

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu investigated the relationship between perceived authenticity, existential authenticity, psychological wellbeing, subjective wellbeing, and memorability.

CO-AUTHORS

Xiaoli Yi
Department of Hospitality Management, Shenzhen Tourism College,
Jinan University, Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, China.
www.researchgate.net/profile/xiaoli-yi

Vera Shanshan Lin
School of Management, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang
Province, China.
person.zju.edu.cn/en/shanshanlin

Honggen Xiao
School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic
University, Hong Kong SAR, China.
research.polyu.edu.hk/en/persons/honggen-xiao

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

In what way could this research impact our understanding of expectations on heritage destination experiences in other parts of the world?

|| The research on integrating authenticity, wellbeing, and memorability in heritage tourism can provide insights into the expectations, needs, and preferences of tourists, which can help heritage destinations worldwide improve their tourism offerings. Firstly, it can help us understand the common factors that are important for tourists seeking heritage experiences, regardless of the geographical location. For example, the research may identify that tourists value the authenticity of heritage experiences, the ability to enhance their wellbeing, and the creation of memorable experiences. This information can be applied to other heritage destinations worldwide, enabling destination managers to create more effective and attractive tourism experiences. Secondly, the research can highlight the unique factors that differentiate heritage tourism experiences in different parts of the world. For instance, the heritage experiences in Europe may have different expectations compared to those in Asia or Africa. By understanding these differences, destination managers can tailor their offerings to meet the specific needs of their target audience. Lastly, the research can also help in identifying the potential challenges or barriers that heritage destinations may face in delivering authentic, wellbeing, and memorable experiences. For example, inadequate infrastructure, lack of community engagement, or poor preservation of heritage sites could impact the overall quality of heritage tourism experiences. Addressing these issues can result in a more positive impact on the local economy and community, and enhance the visitor experience. ||

Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu



Xiaoxiao Fu is an Associate Professor at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management. Dr. Fu's research expertise is consumptive experience in tourism and hospitality, addressing how destinations and firms improve consumer experience. As an award-winning scholar, Dr. Fu has published many articles in top-tier journals.

E: Xiaoxiao.Fu@ucf.edu **T:** +1 407.903.8229
W: hospitality.ucf.edu/person/xiaoxiao-fu/