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Eliciting the aspects of local lives in a historical district as perceived by visitors

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to extract the elements that visitors could focus on in a historical district as the aspects of the local lives and visitors' evaluation of them by analyzing respondents' open-ended responses about things that they thought attractive in the targeted historical districts and objects through which they sensed the lives of the locals. The visitors are grouped based on their ratings of their overall impression of the historical districts on Semantic Differential Scales, and comparison between the open-ended responses of the two groups is also attempted to obtain insights into the effects of their visiting experiences. The results imply the importance of visitors' perception of the ways in which the districts are utilized. The areas that the respondents visited are also suggested to relate to their views of the district's features, including the facets of the local lives.

Keywords: *visitors' evaluation, historical district, local lives, spatial behaviors*

INTRODUCTION

While historical districts could attract visitors, many of them also serve as living places for the locals. This explorative study attempts to elicit the aspects of the local lives that visitors could focus on in a historical district and visitors' evaluation of them by analyzing respondents' open-ended responses. Comparison between visitors was also conducted to gain insights into the effects of their visiting experiences.

LITERATURE

Visitors often focus on “features of landscape and townscape which separate them from everyday experience” (Urry, 2002, p.3). For example, in a particular district like an ethnic neighborhood, which is different from the surroundings, its distinction is often emphasized to gain touristic values (Santos, Belhassen & Caton, 2008). A historical district, whose attractiveness can be given by physical links with the old buildings and street/townscape (Orbasli, 2000) and where a sense of historic continuity is conveyed by the

preservation of its restored structure (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000), could also offer such unusual features inherited from the past. However, unlike deserted remains, many historical districts not only serve as historical places but also have been or are still residential places. The lives of the local population within such districts have also been argued to be the driver for visitation. (Jansen-Verbeke, 1995 as cited in Orbasli, 2000, p.47; Ooi, 2002).

The aspects of the local lives in a historical district, from the viewpoints of visitors, seem to include not only unique and notable facets but also more ordinary features, such as daily routines of local residents. Especially when visiting a domestic historical district, visitors may not strongly sense the unusual in contrast to overseas ones due to its geographical and cultural closeness to their daily environments. The significance of such ordinary features is implied by a term, living culture, which is described as an aspect of heritage that involves “less tangible objects and activities, such as traditions, ways of life, ceremonies and rituals, dances, agricultural practices and culinary habits” (Timothy & Boyd, 2003, p.33). Ooi (2002) also uses a term, living cultural product, which is significant and relevant to the local lives and often stems “from the dynamics of local everyday social life, without the reference to commercial tourism” (p.157). Ooi (2002) also refers to the concepts of romantic gaze and collective romantic gaze. Whereas cultural elements, such as an indigenous wedding, which can entail strong senses of originality and authenticity, can be the objects of the former gaze, the latter gaze is placed on objects like locals and their lives in ethnic districts, whose authentic charm can be strengthened by local participation (Ooi, 2002). In this study, the aspect of local lives in a destination is tentatively defined as what visitors notice and regard as an aspect whose existence is attributed to the fact that people have resided there.

Visitors’ gaze on the elements of a historical district could be influenced by visitors’ characteristics, such as their visiting experiences. Their experiences may be examined based on their spatial behaviors in the district. As Shoval and Isaacson (2009) claim, the insights offered by studies of visitors’ spatial behaviors may not only expand the theoretical grounds for tourism studies but also merit practices of tourism management. Although relationships between visitors’ behaviors and their socio-economical characteristics (Debbage, 1991) and their initial purposes (Keul & Kühnberger, 1997) are open to question, visitors’ spatial behaviors may still be relevant, at least, to their post-visit evaluations of the district.

METHODOLOGY

Takayama-shi, Gifu-Prefecture, Japan, was selected as the research site owing to its fame as a tourism destination and its historical values. Takayama-shi has two districts that are designated Japan’s Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Japan (n.d.): Sanmachi and Shimoninomachi-oojinmachi (Shimoninomachi, hereafter). Compared to Sanmachi, designated in 1979, Shimoninomachi was designated relatively recently in 2004. Whereas Sanmachi mostly comprises the municipal commercial areas, more than half of Shimoninomachi is designated the municipal residential areas (Takayama-shi, n.d.).

The on-site research was conducted on 17 and 18 July 2010. One thousand Japanese visitors were asked to complete questionnaires created in Japanese and return them using stamped, self-addressed envelopes. The questionnaire asked respondents whether they had visited Sanmachi and/or Shimoninomachi. They were also required to state “up to five things that they thought attractive in the historical districts in Takayama-shi and the characteristics of the things” (Question 7, hereafter) and “up to five objects through which they sensed the lives of the locals in the districts and the characteristics of the objects” (Question 8, hereafter), in an open-ended form. Additionally, the respondents were instructed to rate their overall impression of the historical districts on the following nine 5-point Semantic Differential Scales, which loaded on a factor, *modern/non-touristic/ordinary- traditional/touristic/unique*, in a past slide experiment with use of photographs taken in and around the same districts (Naoi, Airey & Iijima, 2009):

- Not at all Traditional/Totally Traditional
- Not at all Touristic/Totally Touristic
- Totally Ordinary/Totally Unique
- Place for Locals/Place for Visitors
- Not at all Must-see/Totally Must-see
- Many Incongruent features
- /No Incongruent features
- Totally Modern/Totally Ancient
- Totally Like a Daily life
- /Not at all Like a Daily Life
- Minor Attractions/Major Attractions

In total, 285 questionnaires were returned, and 272 were used for further analysis after the exclusion of respondents with past residence and with no responses about the visited districts.

The ratings of the Semantic Differential Scales served as the basis for the categorization of the visitors. Factor analysis with principal factor method and direct oblimin rotation was performed on the ratings, and the extraction of the factors with each factor having an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 was employed. The factor scores were subjected to cluster analysis, and Pearson's chi-square test was conducted on the contingency table between the resultant clusters and the visited districts. The open-ended responses to Questions 7 and 8 were analyzed respectively with *KH Coder* Ver. 2.beta.23, which is a software package developed by Higuchi (n.d.) for text mining in Japanese. In so doing, words that frequently appeared in the responses were elicited, and the rate of co-occurrence (Jaccard coefficient) of the words in the answer to Questions 7 and 8 was calculated. The co-occurrence rate served as the data for cluster analysis, whose results illustrated the proximity between the words.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After step-wise exclusions of two items, *totally like a daily life – not at all like a daily life*, which showed low factor loadings on any items (<0.4), and then *not at all must-see – totally must-see*, which showed high cross loadings (>0.4), the analysis generated two factors: *touristic*, which is loaded on heavily by *not at all touristic/totally touristic* and *place for locals / place for visitors*, and *traditional uniqueness*, which is loaded on mainly by the rest. The cluster analysis based on the factor scores generated two clusters of respondents: one (Cluster 1, hereafter) with significantly higher scores of both the two factors (both $p<0.001$) than the other (Cluster 2, hereafter) according to t-test. Thus, respondents in Cluster 1 appear to perceive the historical districts more antiquated, unique and touristic than those in Cluster 2. The results of Pearson's chi-square test indicated that, while the ratio of respondents who had visited only Sanmachi was the highest in both the clusters, cluster 2 showed a higher ratio of people who had visited Simoninomachi ($p<0.05$). As Simoninomachi was designated rather recently and may be regarded as less notable, cluster 2 may include more visitors who had chances to catch sight of things that they felt to reflect the lives of the locals.

The words and the associations between them as elicited from the responses to Question 8 imply that not only the historical architectures but also their commercial and residential uses could catch visitors' eyes as the aspects of the local lives. For example, objects such as morning glories and an act of sprinkling a lane in front of a house were observed. These findings may suggest visitors' recognition of the districts as places for living (Ooi, 2002; Orbasli, 2000; Tsuchida, Soshiroda & Tsutsumi, 2008). The conservation of the historical districts was apparent only in the results of Question 7. In this sense, conservation may be regarded as the charm of the districts, but as less relevant to the local lives.

The open-ended questions were also examined by the respective cluster. The results of the analysis of the co-occurrence between the words elicited from the responses to Question 7 and of cluster analysis based on the co-occurrence indicate that respondents in cluster 2 might have tended to perceive the attractiveness of the districts in relation to a wider range of elements, such as their commercial uses and water-related elements like sprinkled water. This may suggest their relatively close observation of the usage of the districts by the locals.

As to the responses to Question 8, while visitors in cluster 1 seem to have related shops and tourism relatively closely with the words, “local” and “life”, those in cluster 2 also showed a tendency to perceive the words, “people” and “live” in relation with “tourism”. Thus, respondents in both the clusters might have regarded the local lives as somehow in close relationships with commercial activities. Turning to the differences, the results of cluster 2 suggest relationships between “inner”, “life”, “traditional” and “the present time”. This could imply their focus on the inner present life, which may be explained by the respondents’ perception of the districts as less traditional, less unique and less touristic.

CONCLUSION

This study extracted the aspects that may cause visitors sensing the aspects of the local lives in a historical district. The findings further indicate the importance of uses of such a district as sensed by visitors. The areas they visited may relate to their views of the district’s features, including the facets of the local lives. These insights may benefit managers who attempt to expand visited areas and to foster visitors’ understanding of the local lives.

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