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How Red is the Communist Heritage Tourism in China?

–A Social Situation Analysis

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Introduction

Heritage is often used by various political agents because of its ability to carry values, norms, and beliefs associated with places, peoples and polities (Sofield & Li, 2011). Tourism, one direct form of utilizing heritage, is therefore always value-laden by nature (Li, Hu, & Zhang, 2008). While in some countries, taking advantage of political heritage is predominantly attributed to an internal impetus, such as reinforcing national identity, in other countries, the economic value of such heritage has been realized due to external market demand. This paper briefly reviews and compares communism-oriented heritage tourism in both the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the current communist country of China. The paper then focuses on the demand side of the latter, namely, tourists' perceptions of communist heritage tourism, using the method of social situation analysis. Our purpose is to discover whether this form of heritage tourism has contributed to establishing the 'red spirit' among its consumers, which is the primary political purpose of red tourism, and whether sustainable development can be achieved.

Communist Heritage Tourism in CEE and China

Immediately after the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe, many Western European tourists flocked to these former communist countries (Caraba, 2011). Previous research suggests that the major motivations of these Western European and CEE tourists were completely distinctive. The former sought to satisfy their curiosity and to experience the different atmosphere of the East (Light, 2001), sometimes they even regarded communist heritage tourism as a form of post-modern tourism (Light, 2000). For CEE tourists, however, emerging nostalgia was the major driving force (Light, 2001). Such different interests have resulted in some conflicts in the process of developing communist heritage tourism, such as the conflict between the desire of portraying the 'Europeanness' and to return back to the European mainstream, versus the desire to keep the 'socialist past' alive to attract West European tourists (Light, 2000). Three approaches to dealing with the socialist past in CEE have been generalized in previous research: emphasizing the pre-socialist 'Golden Period', downplaying the communist

heritage in favor of the modern state, and actively including acknowledgement of socialist pasts in highly contested ways in contemporary identity formation (Young & Kaczmarek, 2008).

Despite the fact that communist heritage has always been exploited to increase devotion to great leaders and its state socialist causes in communist countries (Timothy, 2007), current communist heritage tourism in China, also called red tourism, is somewhat different in two regards. First, it is developing under the mixed mechanism of both government involvement and market economy. While the government still plays the primary role of developer, many market strategies have been utilized to reimage and upgrade it which used to be considered mandatory and essential to demonstrate good citizenship. Second, the paradigm of red tourism planning has shifted from a 'problem-solving view' (patriotic education) into an 'experiential view' and the product design involves more interactive/participative elements. The period since 2004, the year when the first National Red Tourism Development Planning (NRTDP) program was launched, has been witnessing huge market growth (Li & Hu, 2008). Currently, 'red fashion', such as red songs, red books and red movies, is sweeping all of China. The extrinsic reasons for the Chinese government's heavy involvement include resisting foreign hostile forces to overthrow the socialist regime and reinforcing the legitimate leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), reducing the regional development gap, as most red heritage sites are located in poorer, land-locked provinces and reconstructing a national identity against the current lack of solid belief system among Chinese citizens (Caraba, 2011). There is a widespread view that the current belief system vacuum might become a menace to the leadership of the CCP and lead to varying levels of social moral corruption. Thus, the authorities are considering ways to 'red spirit'--a combination of the elements of classic communist ideology, Chinese traditional virtues, and patriotism.

Review of Previous Research

A few studies on communist heritage tourism have been conducted in Europe and China. While in Eastern Europe, most studies focus on identity building or crises (Light, 2000, 2001; Hall, 1999; Young & Kaczmarek, 2008), problems of heritage interpretation (Light, 2000), and the relationships between tourism and the legacy of communism (Light, 2001), research on red tourism in China has been done more from the perspectives of marketing strategies and product development models (Yin, Zhu & Gan, 2005), such as image rebuilding, market analysis, and consumer research (Cai, 2006). Regarding tourism activities, while red tourism in China is more related to the Chinese communist revolution, the communist heritage tourism in CEE focuses more on communist regimes and their downfall. As well, the interpretations of communist heritage are different between the two regions; it tends to glorify the communist past and present in China, whereas in CEE it promotes mainly negative views of the communist past. Although there are significant differences in communist heritage tourism and its relevant research between CEE and China, both research bodies are predominantly descriptive and conceptual, with empirical studies of the direct participants in communist heritage tourism lacking.

Research Question

Although the data regarding red tourism receipts have shown how impressive the development of communist tourism is in China during the past seven years, to a large extent, it is the central government that spends tax payers' money on subsidizing schools, government departments, and state-owned companies to encourage them to participate in it. Sometimes, such subsidies are misused as one ostensibly legal channel for officers' corruption (Li et al., 2008). Therefore, whether such a form of communist heritage tourism can be sustainable in the long-term is still highly questionable. Since the potential conflict between market forces and the nation-state guidance is the key to understand the sustainability of red tourism, a closer look at the market forces is necessary. In fact, previous research has demonstrated that red tourism could become a camouflage for other forms of tourism—many tourists visiting these political 'holy lands' in China admitted that their primary motive was not to commemorate the past of communism but to participate in ecotourism, other sightseeing, and

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entertainment experiences (Li, Hu & Zhang, 2008). Using the method of social situations analysis, this paper aims to analyze how the social interactions among tourists, tour guides, vendors and local residents could influence people's perceptions of red tourism. In this way, we expect to achieve a deeper understanding of red tourism in terms of whether and how the red spirit can be shared and inherited between generations of Chinese people and how red tourism can contribute to the ongoing endeavor of 'New Chinese Nationalism' through the consumption of red heritage.

Methods

The effects of service encounters on customers' evaluations of the service experience have been studied as tourists share the same public business environment as other customers in the service context (Martin, 1996), such as tourist-guide interaction (Pearce, 1984), tourist-host interaction (Pearce, 1990), and customer-customer interaction (Murphy, 2001). This paper employs social situations as the research framework which includes eight principal components of *goals, rules, roles, repertoire of elements, language and speech, sequences, concepts and cognitive structures, and environmental setting*. Each element will be analyzed in the red tourism context to generate a detailed profile of the dynamics of social interactions. This proposed study will use a mixed method to analyze the research question, including semi-structured interviews, an open-ended and structured questionnaire, and content analysis of the interpretative programs to generate themes and the ways red attractions are presented. Data collection will be conducted in several of the most famous red destinations with the considerations of financial and temporal constraints. A few candidate spots include Yan'an (the holy land of Chinese revolution), Zun Yi (the city of milestone), and Jing Gang Mountain (single spark can start a prairie fire). Data collection will begin in July 2012 and end in December 2012, and at least 25 individuals will be interviewed to generate dimensions of some constructs (goal/motivation, satisfaction, experiential value, perceived authenticity etc) in the red context as previous methodological research indicates that interviewing more than 25 individuals will increase the likelihood of saturation of themes (Creswell, 2007). A structured questionnaire will also be developed based on the results of interviews.

Expected Outcomes

Despite the fast growing market, whether or not red tourism has contributed to establishing the 'red spirit' and sustainable development can be achieved have not been studied empirically. As Chinese tourists prefer collective activities and in fact most red trips are organized as groups, this paper aims to answer the research question from the perspective of social situations, namely, how the intra-group and inter-group social interactions can influence tourists' perceptions and behaviors. It is expected that this proposed research will have important political and managerial implications for both central and local governments, local communities involved in communist tourism, and tourism business towards development strategies and red product design.

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