Authenticity and Tourism in Kazakhstan: Neo-nomadic Culture in the Post-Soviet Era

Guillaume Tiberghien[1]

Received: 21/04/2015

[1] School of Interdisciplinary Studies, The University of Glasgow, Dumfries Campus, Rutherford/McCowan Building. Crichton University Campus, Dumfries DG1 4ZL, Scotland, phone: +44 (0)1387 702004, e-mail: guillaume.tiberghien@glasgow.ac.uk

Goal and objectives of the dissertation
Goal
The overall aim of this study is to investigate the perception of authenticity in Kazakhstani tourism practices through the lenses of visitors, community members, policymakers and tourism developers involved in the development of eco-cultural tours. Using two embedded case studies in Central and South Kazakhstan, the study aims to advance theoretical and empirical understandings of various stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity in the comprehension of destinations' cultural heritage. The research explores new directions in which to apply the concept of authenticity in eco-cultural tourism by theorising the link between both the perception of authenticity and the access to higher levels of cultural penetration and as a basis for interaction and social exchange within the host–guest relationship.

Objectives
1. To critically discuss models and dimensions of authenticity in the Kazakhstani tourism destination context.
2. To record and review various stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity in Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices.
3. To examine in what ways a deeper understanding of authenticity can be used to inform the planning and future development of tourism.
4. To evaluate the contribution of grounded theory methodology when exploring various stakeholders' authentication positions in eco-cultural tourism practices.

Methodology
Taking into account the exploratory nature of doctoral study and the limited amount of existing academic literature surrounding the subject of authenticity in Kazakhstan,

grounded theory was considered an appropriate methodology to adopt for this research. Grounded theory is a proper design to use when a theory is not available to explain a process (Creswell, 2007), like understanding various stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity in a tourism destination that has not been researched before. Using grounded theory, the researcher elaborated around a central phenomenon which included the concept of authenticity in tourism studies, causal conditions, strategies for eco-tourism development, the Kazakhstani socio-cultural context and consequences for the local tourism industry.

Empirical research is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between August 2011 and May 2012 which were carried out with various stakeholders including visitors, community members, policymakers, tourism developers and specialists in nomadic culture. At the first qualitative exploratory stage, the study used twenty four in-depth semi-structured interviews with different tourism stakeholders involved in the development of eco-cultural tours in Kazakhstan, comprising local government officials, tourism operators, home-stay providers, NGO coordinators and experts in nomadic culture. At the second qualitative stage, a total of twenty five semi-structured interviews were undertaken with visitors during the 'Kyzylarai' tour in Central Kazakhstan and the 'Tulip' tour in South Kazakhstan. As part of the informant triangulation and theoretical sampling strategy, twenty nine Free Independent Travellers FITs were additionally interviewed.

Results
The study reveals various perceptions and conceptualisations of authenticity in Kazakhstani tourism practices through the lenses of visitors, community members, policymakers and tourism developers involved in the planning and development of eco-cultural tours in Kazakhstan. By reflecting on the multiple stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity of various topic areas in Kazakhstani cultural heritage, the study provides a depth of understanding of various stakeholders in the process of authenticating neo-nomadic culture and their perceptions of authenticity; and focus on identifying indicators of the authentic/inauthentic heritage experiences.

The study details that three themes authenticated by tourism providers can contribute to an authentic eco-cultural tourism experience for visitors: the geographical imagination (nomadic cultural landscapes), crafts purchased by tourists, and performative spaces (nomadic home-stays and nomadic food). In particular, participatory activities with local home-stay providers and the feeling of being 'part of the family' are emphasised by several home-stay providers as a way to foster the host–guest relationship and visitors' perception of authenticity of their tourism experiences. The study details that visitors' subjective evaluations of an authentic tourism experience in Kazakhstan encompass various performative aspects of their travels in the country – specifically, aspects that induce creative reciprocal relationships between hosts and guests.

Theoretical conclusions
The grounded theory methodology allowed the inductive production of a conceptual theory of 'transnomadic authenticity' by constructing relationships between four major concepts: 'the characteristics of the tourism experience', 'the destination context', 'global travelling trends and mobilities' and 'visitor profiles'. The use of a constructivist version of the grounded theory methodology enabled the researcher to interpret holistically the various stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity from a range of multiple realities to create a meaningful understanding of how visitors access higher levels of cultural-heritage penetration when travelling in Kazakhstan. By advancing theoretical understandings of the role authenticity plays in visitors' access to cultural heritage, the thesis provides a rich and broad context through which to understand how the model of 'transnomadic authenticity' can be used to enhance visitors' perception of destinations.

The identification of visitors' experiential patterns in Kazakhstani tourism encounters contributed to understanding the role authenticity plays in the host–guest relationship and in the access to the 'backstage' of tourism destinations. By creating the conditions for reciprocal exchanges between hosts and guests, the guest house tourism encounter allows both hosts and guests to share information with each other. The existential moments and creative reciprocal relationships visitors experience with their hosts incrementally enhance their perceptions of authenticity of the places they are visiting.

Practical application of the dissertation

By detailing various stakeholders' authentication positions about topics identified as being important sources of authentic tourism experiences for visitors, this study explores the complexities inherent in the analysis of the question of authenticity in the development of tourism in Kazakhstan. In particular, this study makes a practical contribution associated with the incorporation of the notion of authenticity as a unique and important feature in future Kazakhstani tourism products and experiences to differentiate Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices from relatively similar tourism destinations.

The thesis underpins more specifically the managerial implications of the process of commodification of Kazakhstani cultural heritage and details three themes authenticated by tourism providers that can contribute to an authentic eco-cultural tourism experience for visitors: the geographical imagination (nomadic cultural landscapes), crafts purchased by tourists, and performative spaces (nomadic home-stays and nomadic food). The thesis examines ways a deeper understanding of authenticity can be used to inform the planning and future development of Kazakhstani tourism, including the rejuvenation of existing cultural heritage assets, eco-labelling of guesthouses, certification of traditional handicrafts and local community's participation and empowerment.

Content of the dissertation
Abstract of chapter one
Chapter one introduces the rationale and significance of the study. The country of Kazakhstan is not a well-known tourism destination, either globally or within Central Asia. Although the number of inbound tourists remains relatively small, the country possesses numerous tourism attractions based on its past Soviet times, nomadic culture and a variety of unique landscapes. Whereas the tourism industry tends to provide its own definitions of the traditional or typical, it is important to gain an understanding of tourists' perceptions of authenticity of objects and experiences, as well as to understand how Kazakhstani tourism attractions and destinations are constructed and marketed by the private and public sectors. This PhD research investigates more specifically the perception of authenticity in Kazakhstani tourism practices through the lenses of visitors, community members, policymakers and tourism developers involved in the development of eco-cultural tours.

Abstract of chapter two
Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of the concept of authenticity in cultural heritage tourism and examines how the perception of authenticity of multiple stakeholders can be used to enhance the host communities and visitors' experiences. The review begins with introducing the notions of global nomads and existential migration as they apply to the question of authenticity in mobility studies. It is then followed by an examination of the commodification of authenticity and the visitors' access to cultural heritage (Jamal & Hill, 2004; Xie, 2011). Other dimensions that form part of this review include a definition of the notion of authentication examined from the perspectives of both tourism providers and visitors. The review then extends to look at the distinct social processes associated with each mode of authentication and, in particular, considers the performative practices of authentication that affect the host–guest relationship. The review of the literature concludes by exploring factors that influence and affect the host–guest

relationship, in particular the notions of intimacy, reciprocity and serendipity that affect the nature of their exchanges.

Abstract of chapter three
Chapter 3 introduces the research design and describes the methods used in the study. The chapter begins by presenting the research framework and paradigm and the main reasons for using a qualitative research design. The discussion then focuses on the relevance of using the methodology of grounded theory as an appropriate method for the study. An embedded case study in Central Kazakhstan and a second one in South Kazakhstan serve as sources of empirical evidence to explain how various stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity allow higher levels of cultural-heritage penetration. This is followed by an overview of the data collection process and the criteria used to recruit the research participants. Multiple sources of data including semi-structured interviews with groups of experts in nomadic culture, government officials, international and local visitors, local home-stay providers and tourism operators are detailed. A description of the different steps and the context necessary for the analysis and interpretation of the data then follows. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the process for generating a theory using the grounded theory approach.

Abstract of chapter four
Chapter 4 presents the findings that focus on the perceptions of authenticity of community members, policymakers, tourism developers and specialists of nomadic culture in Kazakhstan. Using the cases of Kyzylarai and Tulip tours in Central and South Kazakhstan, the chapter is divided into three sections: an overview of the rebirth of nomadic culture in the country and its characterisation; tourism providers' authentication positions regarding various topic areas and indicators of authenticity incorporated into eco-cultural tourism experiences in the country; and the attributes of the performative aspects of the tourism experiences made available to visitors. Key findings of the chapter are illustrated by authenticity concepts taken from the academic literature to clarify the depth and complexity of various tourism providers' perception of authenticity in Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices.

Abstract of chapter five
Chapter 5 addresses the findings related to visitors' perceptions of authenticity when undertaking eco-cultural tours in Kazakhstan. The visitors were both 'Kyzylarai' and 'Tulip' tour clients, and Free Independent Travellers (FITs) comprised of expatriates, international travellers, Kazakhstani and international students. The chapter is also divided into three sections: visitors' evaluations of an authentic tourism experience in Kazakhstan; a detailed overview of the visitors' perceptions of nomadic culture and the characteristics of its renaissance from the identified study themes in Chapter 4; and visitors' quests for authentic experiences. This last section considers the attributes of the performative aspects of authenticity as they relate to the visitors' travelling experiences in Kazakhstan. The structure of the chapter follows the structure of chapter 4 to inform various themes and categories of the transnomadic authenticity model developed in chapter 6. Key findings of the chapter are illustrated by authenticity concepts taken from the academic literature to clarify the depth and complexity of various visitors' perceptions of authenticity in Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices.

Abstract of chapter six
Chapter 6 draws on cross-cutting themes identified from the various stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity identified in chapters 4 and 5. The chapter starts with an introduction and a presentation of the model of 'transnomadic authenticity' in Kazakhstani tourism encounters using the grounded theory methodology. By outlining the tensions between tourism providers and visitors' perception of authenticity in Kazakhstani tourism encounters, the chapter presents the themes and their categories that ground the transnomadic authenticity model. Four elements undergoing dynamic and interactive changes are then discussed as factors that influence the qualifying dimensions of

transnomadic authenticity. The qualifying dimensions of transnomadic authenticity are detailed at the end of the chapter.

Abstract of chapter seven

The concluding chapter recapitulates the main study findings and the theoretical and empirical contributions of the thesis. The chapter starts with an overview of the research and answers to the major research questions. A proposition to integrate the transnomadic authenticity model into cultural-heritage tourism is then examined. The chapter describes in particular the various parameters of the host–guest relationship that facilitate access to the 'backstage' of tourism destinations. The thesis ends with a brief analysis of the future research agenda needed to broaden the scope of implementation of some of the qualifying dimensions of transnomadic authenticity.

References:

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Jamal, T., & Hill, S. (2004). Developing a framework for indicators of authenticity: The place and space of cultural and heritage tourism. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research, 9*(4), 353–372.

Xie, P. F. (2011). *Authenticating ethnic tourism.* Bristol: Channel View Books.