
Heritage conservation and urban development in China: the mediating role of tourism?

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Abstract

Frictions between heritage conservation and urban development in the developing context has received growing attention with what the United Nations calls the on-going ‘second wave of urbanization’ (UNFPA 2007). Rapid urban expansion transforms the faces of cities, endangers the old and historic buildings, and put them in dilemma between change and continuity. However, with limited resources, especially financial resources, a priority is often given to socio-economic development, posing great challenges to heritage conservation in the developing context (Setiawan and Timothy 2000).

Among the many possibilities that link heritage conservation and urban development, tourism has taken a central stage (Teo and Huang 1995). On the one hand, tourism stimulates urban development, thus receiving increasing support from the state; on the other, heritage tourism constitutes a very popular and substantial part of tourism (Prentice 1993). Heritage tourism grows much faster than other forms of the sector and has been considered a useful tool for economic development (UNWTO 2005).

Heritage tourism is not only a remarkable but also debated form of tourism, particularly in the developing world where economic motives tend to overshadow its endeavor for heritage conservation in the broader context of local and regional (economic) development (Nuryanti 1996, Poria et al. 2003, Timothy and Nyaupane 2009). However, calls for heritage protection through tourism are increasingly heard at the same time, emphasizing the interrelation between sustainable urban development and sustainable cultural tourism through harnessing the cultural heritage resources in a socially, culturally and economically sustainable way (Garrod and Fyall 2001, Setiawan and Timothy 2000, Tweed and Sutherland 2007).

This paper is to explore the heritage-tourism-urban development dynamics in the context of China, with the research questions ‘Does/Can tourism play a mediating role between heritage conservation and urban development? If so, under what circumstances and to what extent?’

Two heritage (tourism) sites in the city of Xi’an are carefully chosen for detailed studies: the Xi’an City Wall and the Fengyukou Oil Mill. The former, located in the urban centre, has been protected as state-level tangible heritage since 1961. While, the latter has been only recently enlisted as provincial level intangible heritage. Located in the urban outskirts, the impact from urban development is also very recently felt.

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Studies show mixed results. The mediating role of tourism relies on a comprehensive development goal that focus on an integrated socio-cultural and economic development and put heritage conservation, urban development and tourism on an equal footing. But other factors contribute too, such as the heritage status and legal protection, the perception of heritage and its position in the relation, as well as the role of heritage administration in heritage-tourism-urban development projects.

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