

## **Rethinking 'heritage' in post-conflict tourism**

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## Introduction

This research note calls for a rethinking of 'heritage' in analysing post-conflict tourism development. Traditional understanding of heritage involves legacies of the past that are deemed important and conserved in the present for the benefit of future generations. However, contemporary notions of 'heritage' in tourism have taken on new meanings and manifestations. The commercialisation of history overflows the fixities of traditional heritage *stuff* to include active and creative (re)production of *heritages* by local communities. As such, in the study of post-conflict tourism, a shift from an ontology of heritage as 'already there' to one that recognises that heritage is always in the state of becoming is envisaged. Relatedly, there is a need to recognise ordinary people's agency. This calls for a better understanding of how the past as heritage is interpreted by the locals, how they create heritage for the purpose of tourism, and how these heritages can be experienced beyond the sense of sight. This commentary utilises the case of Kinmen, a former Cold War frontier-turned-battlefield tourism destination to highlight some research possibilities.

## Post-conflict tourism: engaging difficult heritage

Tourism is often utilised as a stepping stone for re-establishing cordial relations between places/communities formerly in conflict. Conflicts may include ethnic clashes, religious differences or political rivalry, and these difficult pasts are inevitably encountered by tourists from both sides. If such heritage increases the complexities associated with tourism politics, post-conflict tourism becomes even more sensitive when it is associated with historical sites of bloodshed. Existing studies have focused on the cultural politics inherent in the production and consumption of such 'difficult heritage' (Logan & Reeves, 2008). These range from the curation of war heritage attractions as pedagogical and entertainment platforms (Henderson, 2000) to post-conflict tourism's role in promoting destination renewal and peace (Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Cho, 2007), and sustainability challenges faced by tourism stakeholders in post-conflict societies (Novelli et al., 2012).

'Heritage' in existing studies on post-conflict tourism is assumed to be already in existence prior to the involvement by stakeholders, rather than actively produced by them. It is something that needs to be worked on, rather than something that '*does work*' (although see Hofmann, 2016; Zhang & Crang, 2016). Moreover, existing analyses have largely adopted a binary thinking of dominance-versus-resistance by looking at how meta-narratives of sensitive histories may be contested by locals and tourists, thus leading to

heritage dissonance (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). There is also an over-reliance on the sense of sight in heritage studies (Hetherington, 2002). In order to uncover the potentialities of post-conflict tourism research in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we need to go beyond existing ontologies and epistemologies of heritage.

### **Beyond the state: Cold War heritage as everyday lived experience**

Politically under the jurisdiction of Taiwan, Kinmen was a frontline during the civil war between Mao Zedong's People's Liberation Army and Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army. Since the abolition of the martial law in 1992, Kinmen has experienced gradual demilitarisation. Defunct military installations have become important tourism resources. The battlefield landscape that represented a bastion of military might was transformed almost overnight into a landscape of appeal for tourist consumption. At the beginning, tourism development was very much state-led. Battlefield infrastructures were preserved either by the county government or the Kinmen National Park. Local entrepreneurs subsequently got involved in offering tourism-related services. In recent years, however, we see more involvement by local residents. He Ying-Cyuan and his community at Pubian Village make an excellent example. Mr He, a committee member of the Pubian Community Development Society, a non-governmental organisation set up by Pubian residents, shared his community's aspiration to preserve its battlefield heritage:

Preservation of the battlefield relics for future generations is an important task of the present generation. To be able to showcase our battlefield relics to tourists is an achievement. It helps create an identity for the villagers.

According to He, his village had only recently organised an exhibition in its air raid shelter:

It was a good idea... rather than letting it remain buried underground. We displayed the various tools that were used by the villagers to build it. Visitors learned about ordinary people's war encounters. No need for tour-guides as there was always a constant stream of old villagers who would reminisce about their past.

This form of heritage is far from grand narratives or 'propaganda-esque' type of heritage endorsed by the state. Instead of the overly nationalised history portrayed in war museums, this is something the locals call their own, which is related to their everyday lived experiences and collective memories (Chiang, 2006). They demonstrated agency in the construction of a post-conflict destination, and this form of agency is not in opposition to the overall scheme of things. The analysis of post-conflict heritage, therefore, should 'incorporate a study of all "micro" governmental practices to reveal the connections between the "political" and all the other types of power relation, practice and technologies' (Coles & Church, 2007: 25). Rather than relying on the dominance-resistance framework (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), future forays need to shed light on self-governance/renewal

by local communities and how conflict-related built environments affect people's attitude towards memorialisation.

### **Beyond visual-centric analyses: tasting battlefield heritage**

Battlefield heritages can also be re-constructed and experienced beyond the sense of sight. Here we focus on food to explore the creative vigour of present-day Kinmenese entrepreneurs. Unlike conventional battlefield artefacts, the gastronomic is highly perishable rather than a perduring link to the past. Yet its material capacities and its visual, olfactory and gustatory consumption create affective resonances that can be just as powerful, if not more intimate, in its ability to shape people's consciousness of the past and present. The sprouting of locally-produced products associated with Kinmen's battlefield heritage is telling of the generative effects of the new memorial governance through tourism development. The 'Battlefield Mine Cake' is a case in point. It is individually packed in camouflage sachets to accentuate the battlefield theme. However, increased sensitivity towards China has evolved into greater awareness of the Chinese market as a whole, as the maker revealed:

I originally thought of coming up with a comic strip to instil a certain storyline...for instance someone stepping on a mine and how he was rescued – a common memory amongst Kinmenese. However, as I intend to promote this cake in China, it is wise not to deal with the battlefield history too much.

Although the maker wished to lend a biography to the product to accentuate its battlefield identity, she was worried that it might evoke sensitive issues of bloodshed. Indeed, '[t]hings... are active agents of identity rather than pale reflections of pre-existing ideas and socio-political relations...' (Tilley, 2004: 222). In order to 'sanitise' the destructive image of the mine, the war was remembered not for the sufferings caused, but the peace for which people yearned. The back of the mine cake wrapper reads: 'Hidden beneath the white sandy beaches were countless mines. In today's peacetime, the mine "Q" cake will break out from the line of defence to explode your taste buds.' 'Q' here could mean either a chewy texture or cute. With a smooth face, savoury chocolate coating and soft texture, this 'mine' seeks not to cause harm, but to submit itself to the consumer's taste buds. Memories of the war as materialised by the body of the cake are thus fragmented and selective. In order to make the 'mine' more palatable, the entrepreneur seeks to re-construct heritage and uses a play of words to soften the apparently hard-to-swallow war memories. The gastronomic qualities of the cake allow us to gain a more intimate understanding of alternative ways in which Kinmen's post-war material culture participates in tourism development. The sensorium (Ong, 1991), an arena within which the sensory apparatus of an individual or a culture operates, could be a useful place to situate and advance ontological discussions on post-conflict materiality and material culture in terms of what they *can do*, not just what they are.

## Future research

The post-conflict tourist destination and its related merchandise are not fixed entities for 'landscape reading'; it is a landscape that 'does work' (Bunnell, 2004), and is constantly being (re)invested with and evoking emotions and meanings. Indeed, locals are re-creating sensuous heritages rather than producing soulless tourism commodities. Following the likes of Thrift (2001) and Crang & Coleman (2002) in advocating a shift from the epistemology of landscape interpretation to an ontology of place construction, future research should see actions by locals and the things they create, less as sites of representations, than as active agents that continuously re-shape our understanding of heritage in post-conflict tourism.

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