CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES ON MARKETING HONG KONG’S CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM ATTRACTIONS

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Introduction

Addressing the radically different needs of the tourist, who is travelling to seek experiences, and the community, that seeks some financial benefit from the traveller, poses the greatest challenge for tourism in general and for cultural tourism in particular. The commodification of cultural heritage assets presents a number of issues for their management, not the least of which is the challenging task of accommodating both the needs of the tourism industry and the ideals of local attraction managers (Bazin 1995, Cheung 1999, Peleggi 1996, Robb 1998, Sletvold 1996). The marketing and commodification of heritage assets for tourism includes more than just promotion of a selected group of assets, it should also cover their presentation, conservation and strategies employed for visitor management to balance conservation, host community and tourism needs.

Ashworth and Tunbridge (1996) note that local people and tourists have quite different expectations of heritage, which may not necessarily coincide. Although obvious this point can cause many problems in the official selection of heritage for promotion to tourists because there may be tension between tourism and local uses. In particular, tourists are likely to come with a variety of needs and expectations, some of which may have been created through clever marketing. Getting the balance right between educational and entertainment in the presentation of an attraction may not be possible if the goals of tourism planners and attraction managers are disparate.

Tourism experiences, especially many cultural tourism experiences, have their basis in entertainment. To be successful, and therefore commercially viable, the tourism product must be manipulated and packaged in such a way so as to be easily consumed by the public (Cohen 1972). Clearly, learning opportunities can be created from the experiences, but their primary role is to entertain (Ritzer and Liska 1997). Even museums and art galleries that are developed to provide educational and cultural enlightenment have recognised that they are in the entertainment business and have arranged their displays accordingly (Zeppel and Hall 1991, Tighe 1985, McDonald and Alsford 1989, Prideaux and Kinnimont 1999). The reason is that only a small number of tourists really want to seek a deep learning experience when they travel. The rest are travelling for pleasure or escapist reasons and wish to participate in activities that will provide a sense of enjoyment.

In Hong Kong, many cultural heritage assets are presented with an educational or religious goal foremost in mind and for the host community. Little reference is made on-site to local culture as a blend of East and West in line with Hong Kong Tourist Board’s marketing or presented in a way that is entertaining as well as educational for overseas tourists. The local community also misses out, as many of the larger museums are not visited by people beyond school age due to this strict emphasis on education and less on fun (Chow et al. 2002). Heritage trails (that include heritage places both secular and religious), temples and museums are conceived by attraction managers to be educational or sacred foremost and tourism needs are seen as an additional and much less significant function, which requires little effort to be accommodated. Although the Hong Kongness of these heritage assets is evident in many cases to locals, it is not necessarily presented in a way that will make it familiar or appealing to the majority of overseas tourists (du Cros et al. 2002, McKercher et al. 2002).

However, without asset managers agreeing to list tourism as one of their asset’s foremost functions, many other heritage assets may not be conserved or funded even though the main user groups are not tourists, but schools or worshippers and pilgrims. The examples that fall into this category are usually small temples, isolated buildings and villages away from the main centres of population not the larger and more central museums and temples. Heritage funding may not stretch to conserve these assets without some appeal to community or charity resources to assist in their repair and maintenance for the purpose of presenting it to tourists. Paradoxically keeping them for schools or locals to visit is just not seen as an important enough reason to seek such funding, despite the heavy emphasis on educational and religious goals at the larger, more centrally located museums and temples. However, as tourism attractions, the former could be described in marketing terminology as secondary and more usually tertiary attractions or demand generators (McKercher and du Cros 2002). In a tourism attraction hierarchy, some heritage assets could be considered to be primary or ‘icon’ attractions that will draw tourists to a destination in their own right. Such attractions are usually spectacular like Hong Kong’s Big Buddha at the Po Lin Monastery or rare like many of the World Heritage sites. Secondary attractions will appeal to tourists once they are already at a destination and are examining the options for best use of their time and so become a more discretionary choice for tourists. The most discretionary choice of all will be made to visit tertiary attractions, which are usually common site types or occur in more remote places and that