

Cultural Events as Tourism Products - Opportunities and Challenges

Dr. Pamela Ho

Hong Kong Community College

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Hong Kong SAR, China

Email address: ccpamela@hkcc-polyu.edu.hk

Ms Alice To

School of Hotel and Tourism Management

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Hong Kong SAR, China

Email address: hmalice@polyu.edu.hk

Abstract

This paper examines the opportunities and challenges of developing cultural events as tourism products. Two annual community events in Hong Kong, namely the Cheung Chau Bun festival and the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance, are examined to investigate the process of developing cultural events for tourist markets. These events have been recognised as important annual festivals for two local community groups in Hong Kong which have long history and are well-sustained. With the emphasis to promote cultural tourism and the need to expand the variety of attractions in tourist destinations, cultural events are seen as a viable option with low capital costs. These temporary attractions help to enhance destination appeal as well as to showcase local customs and traditions to the more sophisticated tourists nowadays. With more travel choices arising in the market, events and festivals, particularly cultural events, allow destinations to sustain its competitive edge by incorporate more of its unique characteristics (Huang, Li and Cai, 2010; Getz 2004). As the same time, tourism revenues can also be used to justify conservation of local intangible heritage.

This study adopts an exploratory approach to examine the two cases in Hong Kong in 2009 and 2010. Site observation and interviews with key stakeholders were conducted to understand the challenges and key elements in developing cultural events into tourism products. With the tourism board and tour operators promoting the events to the tourist market, local community groups shouldered the responsibility to develop the events for the tourists' interests and wants. This posed great difficulties and pressure on local communities who lacked a clear understanding of the tourist market and sufficient resources. Promotion, interpretation and ownership are found to be critical for the success of the development of local community events as tourism products.

Keywords: cultural events; tourism products; conservation; local community; Hong Kong

Introduction

With tourists nowadays seeking a more unique and authentic travel experience other than sun, sand and sea holidays, cultural tourism has become one of the major niche markets in the decades (World Bank, 2000). Among many forms of special interest tourism, cultural tourism has emerged as one of the fastest growing market segments (WTO, 1999). This type of special interest travel concerns learning about and experiencing the past and present of the host community through the consumption of cultural heritage, including physical objects (sites, buildings, artifacts, costumes, art) and social customs (religion, songs, dances, festivals, ceremonies). The development of cultural tourism can not only enhance the destination appeal to the tourist market, but also help to improve the quality of life of local community. Through revitalizing traditional culture and heritage, awareness of the local identity and more leisure choices for destination residents has been enhanced.

Academic and profession emphasis on sustainable tourism development is growing and cultural tourism has been suggested as a good way to balance conservation and development goals (McKercher and du Cros, 2002). The major merit of this form of niche market is that in the attempt of developing heritage for the promotion of a destination, it simultaneously helps to preserve the tangible and intangible heritage through development as tourist attractions. The economic rationale for developing cultural tourism suggests that destinations can develop their traditions and cultural resources for tourists' consumption thereby giving them a competitive advantage in competing with nowadays emerging tourist destinations. In doing so, tourism provides the economic justification for conservation of cultural heritage assets which accedes the use value of cultural heritage. For socio-cultural benefits, converting heritage into tourist attraction can provide more leisure alternatives as well as raise the importance and awareness of heritage among locals.

While much literature has shed lights on the economic, social and cultural impacts of cultural events, relatively few studies attempts to examine the transformation process of cultural events into viable tourism products. As Getz (2008) reveals, there is a lack of concern in festival studies for tourism and take a product orientation incorporating the customer needs and commercial viability. With two major events in Hong Kong

which have been promoted and highlighted by the tourism industry to the international visitors, this study explores the opportunities and challenges of modifying cultural events into tourism products. The paper will begin with a review of relevant literature on the subject.

Objectives

Representing the preliminary findings of the initial stage of a research project on intangible culture, this paper aims to examine the development and marketing process of cultural events as tourism products. The objectives are: 1) to examine the existing development mechanism of cultural events as tourism products; and 2) to identify major management opportunities and challenges of cultural events as tourism products and how they contribute to the existing destination product mix.

Emerging Market of Cultural Tourism

Looking at the development of tourism, culture, heritage and the arts have long been contributing to the appeal of travel destinations, but they have only been identified as a product category in attracting travellers seeking a personally rewarding and enriching tourist experience since the 90s (Zeppel and Hall, 1991). As Timothy and Boyd (2003) suggest the increasing demand for tourism, "...few places exist in the world today that have not been affected by it one way or another. Just as demand for tourism has grown so as demand specifically for heritage-related experience". Many places with rich cultural heritage assets seize the potential of developing heritage to suit this emerging cultural tourism market, a significant and fastest growing component of tourism. Among all forms of cultural heritage, intangible heritage assets including festivals and events are identified as major catalyst to enhance the tourist experience (Saleh & Ryan, 1993).

There are many reasons for destinations in pursuing cultural tourism among different tourism markets. Firstly, developing inherited traditions and culture provides destinations with more unique characteristics that can set themselves among other destinations and possibly prolong the destination lifecycle. Secondly, cultural tourism is a fast and low cost alternative among other forms of tourism requiring lesser capital investment on building large scale attractions (Gursoy et al., 2004). Thirdly, statistics of the cultural tourism market suggests that the potential of cultural tourism market is

large, cultural tourists tend to be wealthier, more willing to spend, and have longer length of stay (Leask and Yeoman 1999; Moskin and Guettler 1997;; Tighe 1985; National Endowment for the Arts 1981). To mature destinations that are approaching stagnation of the destination lifecycle, cultural tourism therefore seems to be a viable choice to revitalize the tourist arrivals for sustaining the continuous economic benefit to the place.

As the report of World Bank (2000) indicates, to capture the cultural tourism market, destinations will have to create their own competitive edge through capitalizing on the 'uniqueness' and novelty of the resources and by avoiding mistakes made by other destinations. To capture the benefits of cultural tourism, destinations need to pay attention on tourists' tastes and desires of the consumption of cultural tourism products fuelled by changes in demographic, social, and cultural factors of the tourism market.

Cultural Events as Tourism Products

Among various cultural tourism products, cultural events provide a valuable strategic option to tourism and government agencies as well as to corporations via sponsorship as marketing tool (Getz, 2004). With the growing attention on event studies, scholars and researchers have started to put the same emphasis on the benefit of cultural events on the locals as well as on the destination uniqueness. It is suggested that proper development of events as tourist attractions may not only satisfy the curiosity of tourists who are temporary visitors to the place, but also contribute to the better quality of life of the local residents (Li, Huang & Cai 2009).

Scholars and researchers conducted various studies attempting to model a planning mechanism for festivals and events (Allen, O'Toole, McDonnell, & Harris 2002; Getz, 1989). However, as Getz (2004) suggests, no events can be replicated and as such, each event possesses its own characteristics and therefore contributing to the overall destination marketing. Although many events are not limited by location, community-based events are mostly dependent of specific time and places and therefore embedded in the cultural profile of the destination. This is also the major reason for national tourism offices to capitalize this intangible culture so as to enhance the destination product mix appealing to different tourist markets and overcome the

seasonality factor because of its temporal nature (Allen et al. 2002). In fact, major event can mobilize tourists to choose a particular destination over others (Getz 2004). However, community-based events such as cultural celebrations and traditional rituals are often owned and organized by local community leaders. Considering their meaning and cultural values to a specific location, hence, it is suggested that general planning and management models developed in literature may not be fully applicable in this type of events due to their unique ownership and programming.

The Transformation Process

Cultural heritage is not tourism product until systematic transformation has been undertaken to convert it as a customer-oriented experience which can satisfy the tourists' needs and wants (Ho and McKercher, 2008; Jansen-Verbeke and Lievois, 1999). Silberberg (1995) classifies cultural tourism products along a willing-ready-able continuum. At one end are cultural tourism products that are not currently attracting tourists but have established this as a goal. In the middle are those not only 'willing' but also 'ready' to make commitments to tourism consumptions. At the other end are those 'able' to attract tourists with careful attention paid to the tourists' expectation including:

- Perceived quality of the product;
- Awareness;
- Customer service attitude;
- Sustainability;
- Extent to which product is perceived as unique or special;
- Convenience;
- Community support and involvement; and
- Management commitment and capability.

This checklist provides guidelines for tourism operators and cultural heritage management to cope with this expanding market by identifying potential cultural tourism products through evaluation of the above criteria.

Jansen-Verbeke and Lievois (1999) argue that selection of heritage and visitor management are essential for formulating appropriate development strategies for cultural tourism development in urban area. As explained further by the authors, the process of tourism product development encompasses three phases: there is a basic product performing its original functions other than tourism, a transformation process, and an end product being functionally diversified for the market. The major concern being raised is that this process of 'tourismification' is an irreversible transformation process which may be controversial among tourism developers and cultural conservators. The factors therefore for successful transformation process for cultural tourism products are:

- Stakeholders' values and objectives
- Morphological characteristics of cultural heritage resources
- Accessibility and Functionality
- Integration with other tourism activities and supporting elements
- Tourist profile and preference

Unlike mega-events, the critical issue in successfully marketing cultural events as tourism products is that they are often highly controlled by community leaders (Getz 1989). However, the tourism sector bears the main responsibility in promoting to the tourist markets. Several studies contend that most events are only appealing to local residents instead of overseas tourists (McKercher et al. 2006; Getz 2004). It poses challenge not only on the effect of cultural events as tourism products but also the proper role major stakeholders, i.e. tourism operators, national tourist office, and the local organising committee, should play in planning and managing this type of event.

Methodology

The methodological design of the larger research project is a case analysis with multiple embedded units. This paper presents findings from two cases in Hong Kong as an exploratory study for further investigation, namely the Cheung Chau Bun Festival and the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance. In order to ensure internal validity, triangulation is employed.

Both primary and secondary data were collected for the study. Secondary data collection includes a detailed literature search on sustainable cultural tourism development, event studies, and a review on existing tourism marketing strategy for Hong Kong. Besides, tourism statistics from Hong Kong Tourism Board were also used to analyze the market demand for various local cultural events.

For primary data collection, in-depth interviews with various community leaders, government agencies, tour operators and tourists as well as participant observation were conducted in 2009 and 2010 during the festival periods. The purposes of these interviews and participant observation are to examine the organization and marketing mechanisms for the two cultural events as tourism products. They also seek to identify the stakeholders' perceptions of the cultural tourism markets and to develop an understanding of why the events is presented and marketed in the manner it is.

All interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. Content analysis, which was defined as a research technique for the objective and systematic description of the content of communication (Zikmund 1997), was used to analyse the data. In analysing and interpreting the data, the procedures recommended by Denzin (1989) were followed.

Historical Background of Cases

Cheung Chau Bun Festival is a popular local event held every year on the 8th of the 4th month of the Lunar calendar for the residents on one of the Hong Kong outlying islands, Cheung Chau. During this three-day festival, all residents on the island turn vegetarian to commemorate Pak Tai, a god protecting the fishermen and drive away evil spirits from the island. A highlight of the festival is a distinguished parade with lion dances, gods, and children dressed up as well-know historical and contemporary characters, which attract a lot of people from around Hong Kong. A bun climbing race is also held at the mid-night after the parade. Climbers race up the bun towers try getting the buns, which represent peace and luck, as many as possible.

The Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance is another significant local community festival held annually on the 14th of the eighth month of the Lunar calendar. This three-day festival

belongs to the community living in Tai Hang in Causeway Bay, which was a small Hakka Village years ago. By dancing with the 67-metre long dragon studded with thousands of burning joss sticks at night along the streets, the residents commemorate the plague breakout befell Tai Hang in 1880. Appearing in the dream of a village elder, Buddha instructed the villagers to light firecrackers and perform a fire dragon dance for three days and nights during the Mid-Autumn Festival. The disease was driven away and the villagers were saved.

Both festivals have been selected and promoted to the tourists by the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb, 2010) as must-see festivals representing the unique tradition and intangible culture of Hong Kong. This Year is themed as “Festive Hong Kong 2010” by HKTb, which is described as (HKTb,2010)

“... an exciting year-long sequence of festivals and events offering visitors a diverse assortment of unique traditional Chinese festivals and Western cultural celebrations. This year, we have a wider selection than ever before, the events are more exciting, the festivals and the fiestas are more fabulous and the entertainment is more exhilarating.”

“The unique Cheung Chau Bun Festival is just one of the four classic traditional festivals that takes place in Hong Kong in May.”

“Coinciding with Mid-Autumn Festival is the unique Fire Dragon Dance - a spectacular ritual guaranteed to be one of the most extraordinary events you will ever witness.”

Other than promotion by the HKTb, there are also various commercial tour operators involved which main role is to organise tours to these festivals. This information suggests that the two festivals should be carefully chosen among the options and highlighted by various promotion channels as the major events in Hong Kong. It is also anticipated that these two events should be popular among tourists and strongly promoted by private tour operators. However, the findings suggest a different scenario of tourist participation and a number of management constraints that raises a major question: Are these two cultural festivals ready and able to receive tourists? This

implies a proper assessment of the tourism potential of the events and a comprehensive transformation process, without which the core values of the events cannot be offered to the tourists.

Findings

As the literature review suggests, a systematic transformation is necessary for actualizing the tourism potential of cultural resources. Findings of this exploratory study, however, question the readiness and ability of the event to cope with growing tourists needs. In this section, the observed level of tourist participation, the interpretation issue, and stakeholder involvement are discussed in details.

Tourism Potential

Echoing the study by McKercher, Mei, and Tse (2006), the authors realized there were few tourists participating in these two festivals. Only a few foreign independent tourists and one or two tour groups on the sites have been observed during the events. In both scenarios, tourists participate passively in the events. Foreign independent tourists walked around the streets to take photos with little interaction with the locals, while tour groups were led by local tour guides with minimal interpretation. Interviews with some of these tourists suggest that participation in the local cultural events was a decision made upon arrival at the destination, rather than a pre-planned activity as suggested by literature. One of the tourists said, “I was not aware of such an interesting event until I’ve arrived...my friends in Hong Kong suggest me to come....” It is therefore a question to be seriously considered: are cultural events potential tourism products that are of high market appeal to motivate tourists visiting Hong Kong? Or are they rather be considered as secondary or tertiary attractions after visiting the major icon attractions in Hong Kong? By looking at various cases in Hong Kong, McKercher et al. (2006) argue that temporary cultural events can hardly be categorized as tourist attractions due to the apparently small number of visitors. The authors agree that community-based festivals are of limited tourism potential and therefore may, at best, serve as tertiary tourist attractions in the overall destination attraction hierarchy. However, all tourists interviewed in this study agreed that cultural events, even of short-duration, enhanced their travelling experience in Hong Kong which complements their usual sightseeing to major icon attractions in the territory. A couple from United States expressed, “it’s good experience, though not

the main reason for us to come, we feel more about the local characteristics and which is very much different from what we experienced in the town, like Mongkok, Tsim Sha Tsui and Causeway Bay...We think it should be of interested to other tourists too..." This event experience reveals the other facet of the traditions of Hong Kong other than the image of modern city. Moreover, two repeat visitors expressed that these festivals were more authentic than the typical Chinese New Year parade held by the Hong Kong Tourism Board.

Another constraint related to the tourism potential is the limited carrying capacity of realizing the potential of these events. The narrow streets of Cheung Chau and the reliance on ferry as the major mode of transportation set a limit for the event's potential for development. Similarly, the backstreets of Tai Hang possess very limited carrying capacity as well. During the Cheung Chan Bun Festival on May 21st, 2010, a public holiday to celebrate the birth of Buddha, the island was already packed with residents and domestic visitors. More than 30,000 visitors crowded at Cheung Chau to witness the festival. This level of visitation is already beyond the island and transportation system's capacities. Despite heavy visitation, retail and catering business cannot cultivate a proportional increment in business. It ends with both tourists and the local public complaining about over-crowding. Nevertheless, the Bun festival is still heavily promoted by the tourism authorities as a major attraction.

The Core Product – Interpretation Issues

One of the major barriers in transforming the cultural events into consumable tourist product is the interpretation issues. It is found to be a critical challenge in offering an authentic event experience to overseas tourists. As the events were organised by local community groups and because of the complicated structure and cultural meanings of the events, comprehensive interpretation seems impossible to be realized. One of the tour guides interviewed said, "...it is very difficult to explain every detail of the event to the tourists because we don't know the exact English terms...what I have on hand relies on my own experience, research in library and internet, otherwise, who can tell you everything?..." A spokesman of a commercial tour operator expressed that all interpretation was prepared by their tour guides and there was no support from the Destination Marketing Organization which they believe should shoulder part of the responsibility. Interpretation is important as they serve as a means to convey the core

cultural values to the tourists shaping the visiting experience at the events. Without appropriate interpretation, the market appeal of the festivals will be hindered as the core product is not able to be offered to the visitors. In fact, although the festivals were organized by and for the local residents, many of them cannot fully explain all the activities in details because the long traditions have been obscured by time. In this regard, conservation of these tradition festivals is under threats. Representative of the Tai Hang Residents' Welfare Association which organizes the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance expressed that keeping the tradition was difficult as the younger generations are no long interested in learning the production skills and procedures of the fire dragon. Over the years, there were fewer and fewer experienced dragon bearers and makers. The event may cease to exist in the future should the “dragon-making” skills are lost.

Stakeholders Involvement

In examining the planning and management of the event, the study finds that both the Cheung Chau Bun Festival and the Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance were organised by the local communities, namely the Cheung Chau Bun Festival Organizing Committee, and the Tai Hang Residents' Welfare Association respectively. Although both cultural events were highlighted and promoted by HKTB to the tourists, the government indeed has limited involvement in the planning and development stage of the events. Throughout the years, these events which were originally not designed for visitors have been modified to reflect the changing society and cultural values in Hong Kong as well as becoming more visitor-oriented. For instance, both events are sponsored by commercial partners and certain visitor management measures have been adopted with the assistance from the government agencies, such as road closure, police force for crowd control, etc. However, the finding confirms the authors' proposition that Destination Marketing Organization, i.e. HKTB, runs in parallel with the festival organizers that offer no insights to the delivery of the core product to the tourists. In fact, there has not been any consideration of the tourist profile and preference in the organization of the events other than reserving a small guest area for the tourists.

The authors have raised a question to the organising committees on why HKTB and other tourism operators have not been involved in the planning stage. Key informants

from the local community indicated that the threat of ownership, conflicts of interest in competing usage of resources, and the fear of over-commodification are the main concerns. It is commented that, "...this is our own event, why do we need others to do so? It is our tradition so better do it by our people..." This illustrates the role and importance of community support and involvement as a critical factor to the success of transforming cultural events into tourism products. It also highlights the lack of cooperation between stakeholders, i.e. local community and tourism industry may result in under-development of the tourism potential of the cultural events.

Conclusions

Every destination may have numerous cultural events, but few of them may possess the necessary market appeal as tourist products. Using two cases in Hong Kong, this exploratory study attempts to understand the consumption of cultural events by tourists and highlights the major challenges in transforming cultural events into tourist products. With the emerging focus on cultural tourism, much of the literature suggests proper transformation for tangible heritage as tourist attractions. However, few studies focus on intangible heritage such as cultural events. The findings show some of the challenges and constraints in organising the cultural events for tourist participation. The essential steps to the success of marketing cultural events as tourist products are an objective assessment of the tourism potential and a systematic transformation process which shapes the core products and modify the experience to suit with tourist needs and wants. It is recommended that further studies can be conducted to illustrate the planning process of these cultural events thereby formulating a systematic framework for marketing and conserving this valuable intangible culture.

In conclusion, this paper presented a brief outline and the progress of an on-going research project regarding cultural tourism in Hong Kong. This paper also serves to solicit views and opinions from affiliates. Owing to the length limitations, many details and information of the study have been omitted. For those who would like to know more about the project and its latest progress, please feel free to contact the authors.

References

- Allen, J., O'Toole, W., McDonnell, I. and Harris, R. (2002). *Festival and Special Event Management*. Australia: John Wiley & Sons.
- Denzin, N., (1989), *Interpretive Interactionism*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications
- Getz, D (2008). Event Tourism: Definition, Evolution and Research. *Tourism Management*, 29,403-428
- Getz, D (2004). Geographic Perspective on Event Tourism. in A, Lew, C.M., Hall, and A.M., Williams (Eds) *A Companion to Tourism*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 410-422
- Getz, D. (1989). Special Events: Defining the Product. *Tourism Management*, 10(2),125-137
- Gursoy, D., K. Kim and Uysal, M. (2004) Perceived impacts of festivals and special events by organizers: an extension and validation. *Tourism Management*. 25(2): 171-181.
- Ho, P. and McKercher, B. (2008). Managing Heritage Resources as Tourism Products. In Prideaux, B. Timothy, D. and Chon, K (eds.), *Cultural and Heritage in Asia and the Pacific*. UK: Routledge
- HKTB (2010). Events and Festivals. On <http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/events/festivals-guide.html>. Accessed 4th May 2010
- Huang, Z., Li, M. and Cai, L. (2010). A model of community-based festival image. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 29, 254-260
- Jansen-Verbeke, M. and Lievois, E. (1999). Analyzing Heritage Resources for Urban

- Tourism in European Cities. In Pearce, D.G. and Butler, R.W. (eds.). *Contemporary Issues in Tourism Development*. London: Routledge. pp.81-107
- Leask, A. and Yeoman, I. (1999). *Heritage Visitor Attraction: An Operations Management Perspective*. New York: Cassell
- Li, M., Huang, Z. and Cai, L.A. (2009). Benefit segmentation of visitors to a rural community-based festival. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 26, 585-598
- McKercher, B., Mei, W. S. and Tse, T (2006). Are Short Duration Cultural Festivals Tourists Attractions?. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 14(1), 55-66
- McKercher B. and H. du Cros (2002) *Cultural Tourism: the Partnership between Tourism and Cultural Heritage Management*. Haworth Press, Binghamton N. Y.
- Moskin, B. and Guettler, S. (1995) *Exploring America through Its Culture*. President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities
- Murphy, P. (1993). *Tourism: a community Approach*. New York: Routledge.
- National Endowment for the Arts. (1981). *Audience Development: An Examination of Selected Analysis and Prediction Techniques Applied to Symphony and theatre Attendance in Four Southern Cities*. NEA Research Division Report No. 14. Washington D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts.
- Tighe, A.J. (1985). Cultural Tourism in the U.S.A.. *Tourism Management*,6(4), 234-251
- Timothy, D. and Boyd, S. (2003). *Heritage Tourism*. Pearson Education
- Saleh, F. and Ryan, C. (1993) Jazz and knitwear: Factors that attract tourists to festivals. *Tourism Management*, 14(4), 289-97

Silberberg, T. 1995. Cultural Tourism And Business Opportunities For Museums And Heritage Sites. *Tourism Management*, 16(5), 361-365

Sofield, T. and Li, F. M. S. (1998). Historical Methodology and Sustainability: An 800-year-old Festival from China. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 6(4), 267-292

World Bank (2000). Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Heritage: A Review of Development Assistance and Its Potential to Promote Sustainability.

WTO [World Tourism Organization]. (1999b). *Tourism Market Trends*. World Tourism Organization Madrid

Zeppel, H. and Hall, C.M. (1991). Selling Art and History: Cultural Heritage and Tourism. *The Journal of Tourism Studies*. 2(1), 29-45

Zikmund, W.G., (1997), *Business Research Methods*, 5th Edition, USA: The Dryden Press