

Current Situation and Issues of Tourism Commodification of Water Town Xitang

Teng Fei ^a and Dinil Pushpalal ^b

^a AEON Compass Co., Ltd.

2-6-1 Nakase, Bihamaku, Chibashi, Chiba, Japan; E-mail: teng.fei.tohoku@gmail.com

^b Graduate School of International Cultural Studies, Tohoku University

41 Kawauchi, Aobaku, Sendai, Miyagi, Japan; E-mail: dinil.pushpalal.b4@tohoku.ac.jp

Abstract

This paper analyzes the current tourism commodification status of the living ancient water town of Xitang in Zhejiang Province, China using primary data. Xitang has attracted 7.5 million tourists in 2015. With the rapid development in Xitang, the commodification situation is getting more and more significant. The authors counted the number and type of shops in main streets in Xitang, which shows that 75% of shops in the main streets are purposely established for tourists, while only 25% of main street shops served both tourists and local residents. Questionnaire survey shows the resident's attitudes toward tourism development. More than 57% of respondents believed that tourism increased the job opportunities, improved their living standard and preserved the hereditary architecture. However, more than 56% of questionnaire respondent's answers show that the prices of goods and land were increased, the number of people who speak the dialects has decreased and the number of thieves has increased. The authors also conducted 30 interviews that consist of different stakeholders including businessmen, accommodation providers, local residents, tourists and local government officers. According to the interviews, more than 80% of businesses are managed by migrant entrepreneurs from nearby large cities. Lands and the houses owned by natives for centuries have been sold or rented to the migrants. Majority of natives of the town has left the town and settled in the nearby cities. It is clear that over commodification has already happened in Xitang. Employing “revised creative destruction model” proposed by previous literature, the authors have concluded that Xitang is now at the stage of advanced commodification.

Keywords:

Architectural heritage, Commodification, Community, Creative destruction model, Water town

1. Introduction

After “Economic Reform” in 1978, the tourism industry has rapidly developed as a pillar of tertiary industry, and has been playing an important role on promote economic growth nationwide and to expand employment. There are many heritage tourism destinations in China, among them “history and culture town” and “water town” tourism are particularly popular. For example, Zhouzhuang, Wuzhen, and Pingyao have been visited by 5.92, 5.31, and 1.27 million tourists in 2010, respectively.

In this paper we raise Xitang as an example for “water town” tourism destination. Xitang is located in Jiaying city, Zhejiang Province, and it is surrounded by Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province and Shanghai. The total area of ancient town scenic area is 1.04 square kilometers. Xitang has a flat terrain and densely covered rivers as well as quiet and peaceful natural environment. Nine river courses run through the township, dividing it into 8 blocks, while the numerous bridges connect the water regions into an integrated one. In this township, there are well-preserved architecture complex of Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties, which are of high artistry and research value. It has become the focus of attentions from both domestic and foreign specialists and scholars with research interest in ancient architectures (<http://www.xitang.com.cn/en/zjxt1.asp>).

Roofed Corridors (Langpeng), the most harmonic scenery of Xitang is a one-thousand-meter old-fashioned roofed corridor along the rivers of Xitang. Roofed Corridors were invested by shopkeepers, and built by the community organizations. Investing in corridors was a social service

rendered by shopkeepers from the past to date, since the corridors protect walkers from rain and sunshine. On the corridors there are many stalls manned by hawkers. The roofed corridor may evoke nostalgia in most travelers (Fei & Pushpalal, 2015).

Heritage tourism in Xitang has supported to revitalize the local economy and also improve the standard of living of local residents. For local residents, heritage tourism is an integral part of everyday life. However, while the economy has developed, a large number of tourists visited affects Xitang's environment and culture. It is becoming clear that Xitang is in an over commodification situation. Ning Wang has defined "over commodification" as make an extreme development of a destination persuaded by the developers and investors, industrializing the destination simply, emphasizing economic benefits too much, and adopting a careless business model at the process of tourism development (Wang, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to understand the current situation and problems of tourism commodification; and to explore influence of commodification for the sustainability of Xitang.

2. Literature Review

While heritage tourism brings solutions to disadvantages of mass tourism, though it has its own problems too. Many researchers have investigated positive and negative influences of tourism on culture and heritage of the host destination. The disadvantages associated with the application of cultural heritage tourism in undeveloped regions are fairly high. One of the disadvantages is too much commercial emphasis: The tourism industry has used local cultures as part of the tourism product by taking traditional rituals, dances, music and crafts that formed part of local people's cultural heritage and 'packaging' it up for tourists. This often involves manipulating culture for tourists 'benefit' until they bear little or no resemblance to the original cultural experiences derived over centuries. In some cases the original meaning of the ritual or performance to local people is lost as the 'tourist' version takes hold (Gunlu, Yagci, & Pirnar, 2009). Sustainable income, improved local services, cultural empowerment/exchange, and improved local community awareness of conservation are the benefits of tourism for local communities; while environmental impacts, economic instability, crowding, excessive development, outside control, economic leakage and cultural changes can be considered as threats.

In an attempt to model the threatening part of heritage tourism Mitchell and Waal (2009) proposed a six-stage creative destruction model to identify the process of evolution of a given heritage site. It is a modified model of 10-year old creative destruction model, which was first applied to test in the community of St. Jacobs, a picturesque village located in the heart of Ontario's Mennonite country (Mitchell, 1998). The earlier creative destruction model consisted with five components namely, early commodification, advanced commodification, pre-destruction, advanced destruction, and post-destruction. The earlier model was modified by adding the stage of pre-commodification before the early commodification for signifying an era of inactive with few consumers. In an attempt to apply the model in an eastern context Fan, Wall, and Mitchell (2008) have investigated Luzhi, a typical water town in China. It was found that the model generally applies to tourism development in Luzhi, some modifications, particularly the inclusion of the roles of government, are required to reflect the nature of Chinese society.

3. Methodology

This paper tries to understand the current situation and problems of tourism commodification of water town Xitang. To meet this objective, three methods; semi-structured interviews, questionnaire surveys and shop-to-shop census have been used. Interviews were adopted to understand the tourism situation of Xitang before 1997 and the changes of Xitang in recent years. Shop-to-shop census was for a detailed understanding of the type and quantity of Xitang's businesses. Questionnaire surveys were used to obtain local residents' attitude towards tourism in Xitang. Finally current situation and issues of tourism commodification of Xitang have been discussed on the basis of the revised six-stage model of creative destruction.

4. The Creative Destruction of Xitang

In the following sections, the development of tourism in Xitang will be described according to the stage of the creation destruction model.

4.1 Pre-commodification

From the interviews we conducted it can be anticipated that the stage of pre-commodification existed until 1997. Some interviewees recalled that schoolchildren had visited Xitang in the early 1990s to draw landscaping pictures. At this time, the main income of local residents was agricultural production. The arrival of the schoolchildren and entertaining some visitors give the local residents only a transitory income. Interviewees said that they did not perceive the development of tourism in this period, and local residents' attitudes towards visitors were positive.

4.2 Early commodification

The early commodification occurred in Xitang between 1997 and 2010. In 1997, Xitang was opened as a tourist attraction under the guidance of the government. In 1997, only 5,000 tourists visited Xitang. After Xitang was registered as a preliminary list of World Cultural Heritage in 2001, the number of tourists exceeded 200,000. The number shows that tourism development of Xitang entered a new period in 1997, after Xitang was opened as a tourist attraction. From 1997 to 2004, the government invested 1.65 billion yuan, for the town's core area of 1.04 square kilometers for the ground slate, the demolition of discordant buildings, river dredging and others. Xitang local government has invested more than 85 million yuan from 2001, for West Street, South Dai Street, Tong Wei Street, North Gate Street and other 18 streets of nearly 20,000 meters long, to bury the electrical power line, network cable, and television cable underground. The government also transformed the stores on the 2,000 meters long West Street, Li Ren Street, Ta Wan Street and other 14 streets. River clean-up, bar repair works, sludge removing works have also been carried out. In 2001, the government invested about 32 million yuan for repairing the West Park, Xue house, Ni house, the Zhang Zheng Root Carving Gallery and roofed corridors etc., which are an area about 31,700 square meters in total. It is understood that the government made a large-scale investment for Xitang after 1997, and those investments led to the growth of tourists, which can be seen from the graph below.

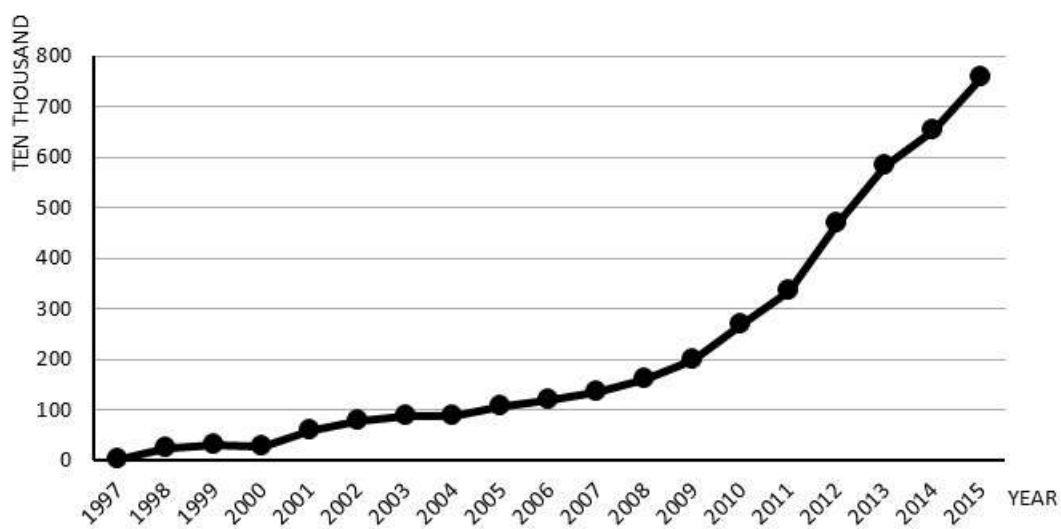


Figure 1 - The number of tourists in Xitang during 1997-2015

Source: prepared by authors based on the data from Jiaying government (<http://www.cnjxol.com>)

There were 658 businesses in total in four streets. Accommodation, local and imported souvenir shops, bars and cafes, clothing stores, fashion stores, juice stores, art stores, shops to be opened soon and books stores were mainly targeted on tourists. Restaurants, local and imported snacks stores and grocery stores were for both tourists and residents. There are 75% of shops for tourists and 25% of shops for both tourists and residents (Table 3). Compared with the number of stores in 2007, the number of stores in 2015 is 2.5 times larger than of 2007. The percentage of stores that are primarily opened for tourists has risen from 66% to 75%. It is clear that Xitang's private investment is still growing and the commercialization is thriving.

Table 3 - Number and targeted customers of businesses in the core travel area in 2015 (Fei, 2016)

Type of business	Number of businesses	Targeted customers
accommodation	183	tourists
local souvenir stores	50	tourists
imported souvenir stores	84	tourists
bars and cafes	18	tourists
fish spa stores	20	tourists
clothing stores	71	tourists
fashion stores	31	tourists
juice stores	14	tourists
art stores	13	tourists
shops to be opened soon	6	tourists
book shops	1	tourists
subtotal	491	
restaurants	45	tourists and local residents
local snacks stores	27	tourists and local residents
imported snacks stores	80	tourists and local residents
grocery stores	15	tourists and local residents
subtotal	167	
total	658	

In order to understand the local people's attitude towards tourism development during this period, the authors conducted a questionnaire survey in 2015 towards the local residents.

The result of questionnaire survey shows that, from the economic perspective, more than 90% of local residents felt that tourism has led to the development of the local economy, as well as the employment opportunities and the living standard. On the other hand, 94% of residents felt that the commodity price and land prices have increased.

From the environmental perspective, 57% of residents thought that the heritage has been protected. 33% of residents thought that canal system, infrastructure and living environment of Xitang have been improved. However, 61% of residents think that air pollution, noise pollution, traffic congestion became a problem as well.

From the social perspective, 72% of residents believe that tourism make fewer people speak dialect, more and more people speak Mandarin. 44% of local residents felt that their lifestyle has changed since many local residents have moved. 67% of residents felt that tourism make them to realize the beauty of their hometown well. However, 33% of residents believe that quality of souvenirs became poor, 50% of residents believe that traditional festivals have been changed, 56% of residents realized the number of thieves has increased.

Although tourism brought many problems to the local residents 78% of them thought that tourism development has a positive effect for themselves. 83% of residents believe that local governments should continue their policies to promote tourism. It is clear that local residents' attitude towards tourism was positive.

Mitchell (1998) argued that when a community moves into the stage of advanced commodification, investment levels escalate. A number of businesses catering to local residents close as entrepreneurs introduce new merchandise to meet demands of the visiting population. However a

number of residents, particularly those who do not benefit financially from commodification, will perceive an erosion of their environment. Considering the factor of improved private investment, the number of tourists and residents' attitude toward tourism's impact, and also the close resemblance between the current status of Xitang and above described features, authors anticipated that Xitang is in the stage of advanced commodification now.

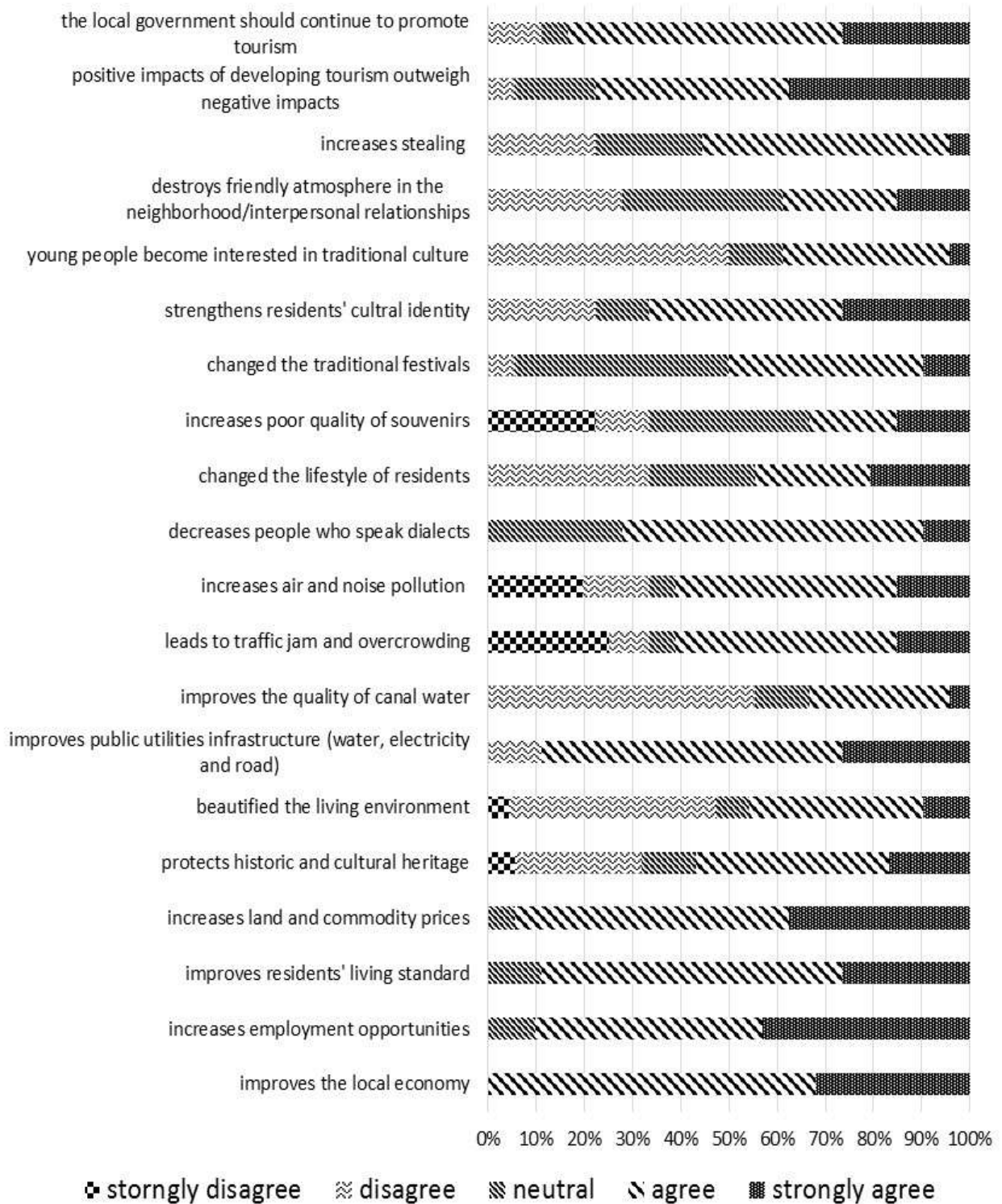


Figure 2 - Residents' attitude toward tourism's impact

5. Conclusions

This paper investigated the sustainability of water town Xitang through the revised six-stage model of creative destruction. The government and private sector investment, attitudes of local residents, number of tourists, and mercantile situation have been taken as determinants of stage of transformation. Statistical data published by the local government has been employed to determine investment level and number of tourists. Mercantile situation was decided by the shop-to-shop census conducted by the authors. Attitudes of local residents were justified by the semi-structured interviews and questionnaire surveys. It is reasonable to decide that the era before 1997 is the pre-commodification stage of Xitang, because tourism gave only a transitory income to the local residents. Declaring Xitang as a tourist attraction by the government in 1997 has marked the starting point of early commodification stage. Increasing number of tourists and the amount of investment as well as local residents' generally positive attitudes made authors to conclude that Xitang is now at the stage of advanced commodification which started from 2011.

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