

China's Cultural Tourism: Strategies for Authentic Experiences and Enhanced Visitor Satisfaction

Wu Jing¹, Ooi Kok Loang^{1*}

¹ City Graduate School, City University Malaysia, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: kok.loang@city.edu.my

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Abstract: *The integration of local culture into tourist experiences is a crucial aspect of cultural tourism innovation, particularly in China. This study aims to explore the factors that influence this integration and its impact on tourist satisfaction. Specifically, the study investigates the independent variables of cultural heritage preservation efforts, cultural immersion initiatives, destination branding, community involvement, and technology adoption. Additionally, it examines the moderating effect of tourist cultural sensitivity and the mediating role of perceived cultural authenticity. Through a comprehensive literature review, qualitative and quantitative research methods, and data collected from both tourists and industry stakeholders, valuable insights into the cultural tourism landscape in China are obtained. The findings underscore the significance of cultural heritage preservation efforts as a foundation for providing authentic and immersive experiences. Moreover, destination branding emerges as a key tool for effectively communicating and promoting the unique cultural aspects of a destination. The study highlights the importance of community involvement in the planning and implementation of cultural tourism initiatives, as it fosters a sense of ownership and leads to sustainable and meaningful experiences for tourists. Furthermore, the integration of technology in cultural tourism enhances visitor engagement and provides innovative ways to showcase local culture. The moderating variable of tourist cultural sensitivity influences the relationship between cultural tourism initiatives and tourist satisfaction. Tourists with higher cultural sensitivity exhibit a deeper appreciation for the cultural experiences offered, thereby enhancing their overall satisfaction.*

Keywords: Cultural Tourism, Local Culture, Tourist Experiences, Cultural Heritage Preservation, Cultural Immersion

1. Introduction

The cultural tourism industry serves as a significant driver of economic growth, job creation, and the preservation of local heritage (Li, Liang, Yu, Ruan & Fan, 2022). In recent years, China has witnessed a rapid growth in cultural tourism, with an increasing emphasis on integrating local culture into tourist experiences (Xu, & Wang, 2022). Nonetheless, challenges persist in effectively leveraging and promoting cultural resources to enhance the visitor experience and drive tourist satisfaction. This research aims to explore the factors that influence the successful integration of local culture into tourist experiences in China's cultural tourism landscape. By examining key independent variables such as cultural heritage preservation efforts, cultural immersion initiatives, destination branding, community involvement, and technology adoption, this study seeks to shed light on effective strategies for cultural tourism innovation.

Cultural heritage preservation efforts serve as the foundation for authentic and immersive experiences. Through the preservation of historical sites, artifacts, traditions, and intangible cultural heritage, destinations can provide visitors with a genuine and enriching encounter with local culture (Su, Bramwell & Whalley, 2018). Understanding the impact of preservation efforts on tourist experiences is crucial in guiding sustainable cultural tourism practices. Cultural immersion initiatives, including interactive workshops, traditional performances, and participatory activities, play a vital role in creating engaging experiences for tourists (Zhuang, Yao & Li, 2019). Such initiatives allow visitors to actively engage with local culture, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of the destination. Investigating the effectiveness of these initiatives in enhancing the overall tourist experience will provide insights for industry practitioners and policymakers.

Destination branding is a powerful tool in communicating the unique cultural offerings of a destination. By effectively branding and marketing cultural tourism experiences, destinations can attract a diverse range of tourists and differentiate themselves in the competitive market (Han, Weber, Bastiaansen, Mitas & Lub, 2019). Understanding the impact of destination branding on cultural tourism innovation is crucial for destination management organizations and marketing professionals (Richards, 2018). Community involvement is instrumental in developing sustainable cultural tourism practices. Engaging local communities in the planning, implementation, and management of cultural tourism initiatives empowers them and fosters a sense of ownership. This, in turn, leads to more authentic and meaningful experiences for tourists. Examining the role of community involvement in cultural tourism innovation will provide valuable insights for destination stakeholders. Technology adoption presents new opportunities for cultural tourism innovation. The integration of technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality, mobile applications, and digital storytelling can enhance visitor engagement and offer innovative ways to showcase local culture. Assessing the impact of technology adoption on tourist experiences will help identify effective strategies for leveraging digital advancements in cultural tourism.

Problem Statement

The cultural tourism industry in China holds immense potential for economic growth, job creation, and the preservation of local heritage. Nonetheless, despite the rich cultural resources available, there are persistent challenges in effectively integrating local culture into tourist experiences (Su, 2019). State-owned hotel enterprises, in particular, face difficulties in establishing competitive brands and positioning themselves in the market. This study aims to address the problem of inadequate integration of local culture and explore strategies for cultural tourism innovation in China.

State-owned hotel enterprises in China struggle to compete in the market due to a lack of brand recognition and limited market awareness. The absence of effective branding strategies and market positioning hampers their ability to attract domestic and international tourists. Consequently, these enterprises fail to fully leverage the cultural resources available at their destinations, resulting in a missed opportunity to enhance the overall visitor experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need for innovation and adaptation in the tourism and hotel industry. The outbreak and subsequent travel restrictions have significantly impacted travel patterns and consumer behavior. There is a need to understand the changes in consumer preferences, expectations, and habits in the post-pandemic era. This understanding will guide the development of appropriate strategies to adjust tourism and hotel products and services accordingly.

Moreover, while cultural tourism is gaining popularity globally, there is a pressing need to go beyond the traditional concept of sightseeing and transform cultural attractions into immersive and engaging experiences. Simply labeling a location as a tourist spot falls short of meeting the evolving demands of modern tourists. The integration of local culture, traditions, and heritage into the visitor experience is crucial to create a unique and memorable journey for tourists. Furthermore, cultural tourism can be a powerful tool for showcasing the diverse cultural heritage present in different regions of China. Nevertheless, successful examples of cultural tourism innovation, such as those seen in Xi'an, Henan, and Zhejiang, are limited. There is a need to explore and identify effective strategies that align local culture, tourism offerings, and visitor experiences to create a holistic and authentic cultural tourism product.

Research Objectives

- RO 1: To examine the key factors that influence the successful integration of local culture into tourist experiences in the cultural tourism industry in China.*
- RO 2: To examine the impact of cultural tourism innovation on tourist satisfaction in China.*
- RO 3: To investigate the moderating effect of tourist cultural sensitivity on the relationship between cultural tourism initiatives and tourist satisfaction.*
- RO 4: To explore the mediating role of perceived cultural authenticity in the relationship between cultural tourism initiatives and tourist satisfaction.*
- RO 5: To provide insights and recommendations for stakeholders in the cultural tourism industry in China to enhance cultural tourism innovation and visitor satisfaction.*

Research Questions

- RQ 1: What are the key factors that influence the successful integration of local culture into tourist experiences in the cultural tourism industry in China?*
- RQ 1: How does cultural tourism innovation impact tourist satisfaction in China, considering aspects such as authenticity, enjoyment, cultural immersion, and value for money?*
- RQ 1: To what extent does tourist cultural sensitivity moderate the relationship between cultural tourism initiatives and tourist satisfaction in China?*
- RQ 1: What is the mediating role of perceived cultural authenticity in the relationship between cultural tourism initiatives and tourist satisfaction in China?*
- RQ 1: How can stakeholders in the cultural tourism industry in China enhance cultural tourism innovation and visitor satisfaction based on the identified factors and relationships?*

Underlying Theory – Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory is a conceptual framework that explores the relationships, interests, and roles of different stakeholders within a specific industry or context. The theory emphasizes the importance of considering and addressing the needs and expectations of various stakeholders to achieve sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes. In the context of cultural tourism innovation in China, Stakeholder Theory provides valuable insights into the diverse range of stakeholders involved in the development, management, and experience of cultural tourism offerings. These stakeholders can include destination management organizations, government bodies, local communities, hotel enterprises, tour operators, tourists, and other relevant entities. Stakeholder Theory suggests that each stakeholder group has unique interests, expectations, and responsibilities, which may sometimes conflict with one another (Plichta, 2019). Understanding and managing these stakeholder dynamics is essential for effective collaboration, decision-making, and the long-term success of cultural tourism initiatives.

Significance of Study

This study holds significant practical implications for the cultural tourism industry in China. By investigating the integration of local culture into tourist experiences and examining the impact of cultural tourism innovation, the findings can provide valuable insights and recommendations for stakeholders in the industry. Destination management organizations, hotel enterprises, tour operators, policymakers, and local communities can benefit from the study's findings, as they can guide the development and implementation of strategies to enhance cultural tourism practices and improve visitor satisfaction. The practical implications derived from this research can contribute to the growth and success of the cultural tourism industry in China.

Understanding how to effectively integrate local culture into tourist experiences is crucial for enhancing the authenticity and value of cultural tourism offerings. By identifying key factors and best practices, this study contributes to providing tourists with more meaningful, immersive, and authentic experiences. It goes beyond surface-level attractions and encourages a deeper understanding of the local culture and heritage. By offering tourists the opportunity to engage with local traditions, art forms, cuisine, and customs, the study aims to foster connections between tourists and the destination. This focus on enriching tourist experiences and promoting authenticity can create memorable and transformative experiences for visitors, enhancing their overall satisfaction and contributing to positive word-of-mouth recommendations.

Cultural tourism has the potential to generate significant economic benefits for local communities. By integrating local culture into tourist experiences, destinations can attract a larger number of cultural tourists, resulting in increased visitor spending, job creation, and overall economic growth. This study recognizes the importance of cultural tourism as an economic driver and aims to provide insights into effective strategies that contribute to local economic development. By highlighting successful approaches to cultural tourism innovation, the research can inspire local businesses, entrepreneurs, and cultural practitioners to develop and promote unique cultural products and services. This, in turn, can create employment opportunities, support local artisans, and stimulate the growth of related industries, ultimately benefiting the entire community.

Cultural tourism innovation can play a crucial role in preserving and conserving local cultural heritage. By integrating local culture into tourist experiences, there is an opportunity to raise awareness about the importance of cultural heritage preservation. This study recognizes the need to strike a balance between tourism development and the protection of cultural assets. By promoting responsible tourism practices, community involvement, and sustainable cultural tourism initiatives, the research aims to contribute to the long-term preservation of cultural heritage. By encouraging the appreciation and understanding of local traditions, rituals, historical sites, and artistic expressions, the study aims to foster a sense of pride and ownership among local communities, promoting the sustainable management and conservation of cultural resources for future generations.

Cultural tourism can enhance the competitiveness of a destination by differentiating it from other destinations and attracting a specific segment of tourists interested in cultural experiences. By integrating local culture into tourist experiences and implementing innovative cultural tourism initiatives, destinations in China can strengthen their positioning in the global tourism market. This study recognizes the importance of destination branding and aims to provide insights into effective strategies for cultural tourism destinations. By emphasizing the

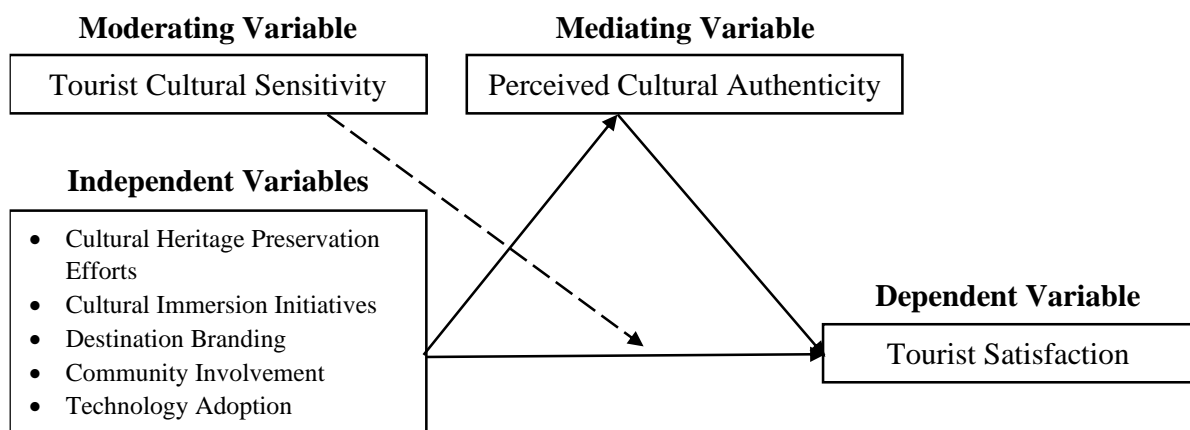
unique cultural assets, authentic cultural experiences, and immersive opportunities available in a destination, the research can contribute to enhancing destination competitiveness. This can result in increased visitor numbers, extended length of stay, and a positive impact on the destination's reputation, ultimately leading to economic growth and sustainability.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study revolves around the integration of local culture into tourist experiences in the Chinese cultural tourism industry. At its core is cultural tourism innovation, encompassing various initiatives and strategies employed to enhance cultural tourism experiences. These include cultural heritage preservation, cultural immersion initiatives, destination branding, community involvement, and technology adoption. Cultural tourism innovation serves as the independent variable, exerting an influence on the integration of local culture into tourist experiences.

The desired outcome of cultural tourism innovation is the successful integration of local culture, where authentic cultural elements, traditions, and experiences are incorporated to provide tourists with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the local culture. This integration is influenced by factors such as cultural authenticity, cultural immersion opportunities, and effective communication of local culture to tourists. The integration of local culture into tourist experiences is a crucial aspect of the conceptual framework.

Tourist satisfaction is the dependent variable in this framework, representing the overall evaluation and fulfillment of tourists' expectations and desires. It encompasses dimensions such as authenticity, enjoyment, cultural immersion, and value for money. The integration of local culture into tourist experiences is expected to positively influence tourist satisfaction as it enhances the overall quality and meaningfulness of the tourism experience. In addition, cultural sensitivity plays a moderating role within the conceptual framework. Cultural sensitivity refers to the level of awareness, understanding, and appreciation of different cultures exhibited by tourists. It moderates the relationship between cultural tourism initiatives and tourist satisfaction. Tourists with higher cultural sensitivity are likely to have a deeper appreciation for cultural tourism initiatives and a more profound engagement with the integrated local culture, resulting in higher levels of satisfaction.



2. Literature Review

Cultural Tourism in Developed Countries and China

The literature review of cultural tourism highlights its significance as a burgeoning sector within the broader tourism industry. Cultural tourism has gained considerable attention in recent years due to the growing demand for authentic and meaningful travel experiences (Liu, Dou, Li, & Cai, 2020). Scholars have recognized its distinct characteristics, emphasizing the motivations and behaviors of cultural tourists, who seek to engage with local culture, heritage, arts, traditions, and customs. This desire for immersive experiences sets cultural tourists apart from other types of travelers.

Cultural tourism holds economic, social, and cultural importance. From an economic perspective, it has emerged as a substantial contributor to local and regional development. By generating revenue, creating job opportunities, and stimulating economic growth, cultural tourism plays a vital role in the overall tourism economy (Wang & Yotsumoto, 2019). Moreover, cultural tourism is recognized for its role in preserving and promoting local cultural heritage, traditions, and arts. By engaging tourists in cultural activities, destinations foster a sense of pride and identity among communities, contributing to social cohesion and the well-being of local residents. Within cultural tourism, various forms have emerged, including heritage tourism, arts and festivals, culinary tourism, religious and spiritual tourism, and cultural immersion experiences. Each form offers unique opportunities for tourists to immerse themselves in and appreciate the cultural aspects of a destination, further enriching their travel experiences.

In developed countries, cultural tourism is well-established and enjoys significant support from both the public and private sectors. These countries often possess rich cultural heritage, historic sites, and world-renowned museums, making them attractive destinations for cultural tourists. Research in this area has explored various aspects, including destination management, marketing strategies, visitor experiences, and the impact of cultural tourism on local communities and economies (Chi, Lee, Ahn & Kiatkawsin, 2020). Scholars have examined case examples from countries like France, Italy, and Spain, where cultural tourism has become a cornerstone of their tourism offerings.

In these developed countries, cultural tourism has been the focus of extensive research and analysis. Scholars have explored destination management approaches, including strategies for preserving cultural heritage, managing visitor flows, and ensuring sustainable practices (Li, Zhang, Yang, Singer & Cui, 2021). The marketing of cultural tourism destinations has also been a significant area of investigation, examining effective promotional strategies, branding initiatives, and collaboration between public and private stakeholders. Furthermore, studies have examined the visitor experiences in these destinations, investigating factors such as authenticity, cultural immersion, and visitor satisfaction (Chi & Han, 2021). The economic impact of cultural tourism has also been a subject of research, exploring how it contributes to local economies, job creation, and community development.

In contrast, China's cultural tourism industry has experienced rapid growth and development in recent years. China possesses a diverse and extensive cultural heritage, making it an increasingly popular destination for cultural tourists (Le, Kwek & Wang, 2022). Nonetheless, the literature on cultural tourism in China is still emerging, with a growing focus on understanding visitor motivations, destination branding, cultural preservation, and sustainable practices. Researchers have examined the unique characteristics of Chinese cultural tourism,

such as the integration of ancient traditions with modern innovations (Ahmad, Draz, Su, Ozturk, & Rauf, 2018), the impact of domestic and international tourists, and the challenges faced in balancing cultural preservation with tourism development.

Studies have explored the motivations and behaviors of cultural tourists in China, seeking to understand their preferences, interests, and the factors that influence their choices of cultural tourism destinations (Yuan, Song Chen & Shang, 2019). Additionally, research has examined destination branding efforts in China, exploring how destinations promote their cultural offerings, create unique identities, and compete in the global tourism market. Scholars have also investigated the preservation of cultural heritage in China, addressing the challenges of safeguarding ancient sites, traditions, and artifacts while accommodating the increasing number of visitors. The literature on cultural tourism in China has also begun to address sustainability concerns, including environmental conservation, community engagement, and the social and economic impacts of cultural tourism (Zhang, Cho, Wang & Ge, 2018). Researchers have examined strategies for achieving a balance between tourism development and cultural preservation, as well as initiatives that promote responsible tourism practices and minimize negative impacts on local communities and the environment (Kim, Whitford & Arcodia, 2019).

In addition to its economic and socio-cultural significance, cultural tourism also plays a pivotal role in destination image and branding. Cultural assets and distinctive cultural experiences contribute to the branding efforts of destinations, aiding in their differentiation and appeal to specific target markets (Dai, Zheng, & Yan, 2021). By leveraging authentic cultural resources and narratives, destinations can create a unique identity and establish themselves as cultural tourism destinations (Weng, He, Liu, Li, & Zhang, 2019). While cultural tourism presents opportunities, it also poses challenges. The risk of cultural commodification, loss of authenticity, and overtourism are significant concerns. Balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with tourism development and managing visitor flows are essential considerations for achieving sustainable cultural tourism. Sustainable cultural tourism practices aim to mitigate negative impacts and ensure the long-term viability of cultural resources.

3. Methodology

Research Design

The study will utilize a mixed-methods research design, which combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. This design allows for a comprehensive exploration of the research objectives, providing a deeper understanding of the integration of local culture into tourist experiences in the Chinese cultural tourism industry. The qualitative component will involve in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, while the quantitative component will consist of a survey administered to cultural tourists.

Sampling

For the qualitative component, purposeful sampling will be employed to select participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience in the cultural tourism industry. Participants will be selected based on their roles and expertise, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. In the quantitative component, a stratified random sampling technique will be utilized to select cultural tourists visiting specific destinations in China. Stratification will be based on demographic factors such as age, gender, nationality, and travel patterns to ensure a representative sample.

Data Collection

Qualitative data will be collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interview guides and focus group protocols will be developed to ensure consistency and cover key research themes. The interviews and discussions will be conducted either in person or through virtual platforms, depending on the participants' availability and preferences. Audio recordings and detailed notes will be taken during the sessions to capture the richness of the data. For the quantitative component, a structured survey questionnaire will be administered to cultural tourists. The questionnaire will be developed based on the research objectives and will include items related to tourist demographics, cultural tourism experiences, satisfaction, cultural sensitivity, and perceptions of local culture integration. The survey will be distributed either online or in person, depending on the accessibility of the target population.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis will involve a thematic analysis approach. Transcribed interviews and focus group discussions will be carefully reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. These themes will then be analyzed and interpreted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the integration of local culture into tourist experiences. For the quantitative data, descriptive and inferential statistical analyses will be conducted. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations will be used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis and regression analysis, may be employed to examine relationships between variables and test hypotheses. Statistical software packages will be utilized for data analysis to ensure accuracy and reliability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines will be strictly followed throughout the research process. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and protection of their personal information. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained by assigning unique identifiers to participants and storing data securely. The study will adhere to relevant ethical standards and seek ethical approval from the appropriate institutional review board or ethics committee prior to data collection.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge potential limitations of the study. These may include constraints related to sample representativeness, generalizability of findings, and potential biases in self-reported data. Efforts will be made to mitigate these limitations by employing rigorous sampling techniques, ensuring diverse participant representation, and utilizing appropriate statistical analyses. Limitations will be acknowledged in the research findings and recommendations.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has explored the integration of local culture into tourist experiences in the Chinese cultural tourism industry. Through a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and quantitative surveys, valuable insights have been gained into the factors influencing cultural tourism innovation and its impact on tourist satisfaction. The findings of this study highlight the significance of cultural tourism innovation in enhancing tourist experiences and promoting authenticity. By effectively integrating local culture into tourist experiences, destinations in China can provide meaningful and immersive encounters that go beyond superficial attractions. This fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the local culture, resulting in higher levels of tourist

satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. The study has also emphasized the economic and socio-cultural importance of cultural tourism. By integrating local culture, destinations can stimulate local economic development through increased visitor spending, job creation, and support for local artisans and cultural practitioners. Additionally, the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage have been recognized as essential aspects of sustainable cultural tourism, ensuring the long-term viability of cultural resources for future generations. The study further acknowledges the moderating role of cultural sensitivity in the relationship between cultural tourism initiatives and tourist satisfaction. Tourists with higher cultural sensitivity exhibit a deeper appreciation for cultural tourism experiences and are more likely to engage with and value the integrated local culture. This highlights the importance of promoting cultural sensitivity among tourists and fostering a respectful and immersive cultural tourism environment.

The findings of this study have practical implications for stakeholders in the cultural tourism industry, including destination management organizations, hotel enterprises, tour operators, policymakers, and local communities. Recommendations include the implementation of effective destination branding strategies, the creation of diverse cultural immersion opportunities, and the adoption of sustainable tourism practices. By following these recommendations, stakeholders can enhance cultural tourism innovation, improve visitor satisfaction, and contribute to the overall development and sustainability of the cultural tourism industry in China.

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