

The Accidental Reconstruction of Colonial Legacy in Hong Kong: A Sociological Review of Built Heritage Revitalisation since 1997

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1. Aim

This paper examines the identity politics of Hong Kong in built heritage revitalisation. Since the transfer of sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997, the new government envisioned a new chapter of Hong Kong story. Du Cros (2004) observed that the government avoided any mention of colonial symbols and highlighted Hong Kong's historical and cultural connection with China at new tourist spots. Around the same period, local tourism burgeoned as local community increasingly concerned about the preservation of built heritage and local history. This paper therefore aims to delineate the reconstruction of Hong Kong identity through the revitalisation of historic buildings as museums and tourist attractions.

2. Data & Methods

Since 2009, the government launched Revitalising Historic Buildings Through Partnership Scheme to revitalise built heritage. Ten (10) out of the 17 buildings were revitalised as museums or tourist facilities. Data was collected through the content analysis of secondary data (e.g., architectural drawings, government consultation papers, promotional leaflets, websites, etc.) of these buildings. Analysis was carried on how these materials represented (1) the history of the revitalised buildings, and (2) the history and culture of Hong Kong in general.

3. Results

Critically applying Urry's concept of tourist gaze, this article analyzed the representation of colonial Hong Kong in the revitalisation of historic buildings in post-Handover period. It identifies three trends: (1) British colonial legacy was fostered through the revitalised historic buildings; (2) the role of Chinese elites and Hong Kong's role to Chinese modernisation during British colonial period were highlighted; and (3) the historic buildings mainly appealed local visitors rather than overseas and Mainland Chinese tourists.

4. Conclusion

This paper disagrees with Du Cros' observation that Chinese nationalism was emphasized over colonial history. Even though the government attempted to re-engineer Hong Kong identity as subordinate to national identity, the revitalised historic buildings ironically amplified the discontinuity between Hong Kong and China, and demonstrated Britain's contribution during colonial era. This paper concurs that tourism is embedded in and reinforces postcolonial relationships. It concludes by arguing that the revitalisation of historic buildings rebuilt colonial legacy by its visual impact and textual information. As historic buildings are rich sources both historical investigation and tourist consumption, its revitalisation will continue to dominate public debate before Hong Kong ended the debate on its cultural identity.

References

- Du Cros, H. (2004) "Postcolonial conflict inherent in the involvement of cultural tourism in creating new national myths in Hong Kong". In: C.M. Hall and Tucker, H (eds.) *Tourism and Postcolonialism: Contested Discourses, Identities and Representations*. London: Routledge. pp.153-168.
- Urry, J. and Larsen, J. (2011) *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*. Los Angeles; London: SAGE Publications.