



Heritage protection and tourism development priorities in Hangzhou, China: A political economy and governance perspective

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ABSTRACT

Government interventions can be important for determining priorities between heritage protection and tourism-related development at heritage sites. This paper uses a political economy approach to examine the government's role in determining these priorities in China, for two heritage schemes at West Lake in the city of Hangzhou. The study considers policy making for heritage protection and tourism development in the context of broad economic and political circumstances, the power and influence of different actors in the schemes' governance, strategic selectivity in the policy choices, and whether views about the policies exhibited a uniform hegemony among powerful and less influential groups. Consideration is given to how the relative priority for heritage protection and tourism development in policies reflected the state's regulation of the economy and maintenance of its political legitimacy. A powerful policy community was found that was beginning to consider other actors' views, but tourism development remained a prominent driver.

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1. Introduction

The governance of heritage can be fraught with tensions between the requirements of protection and conservation and the opportunities for commercial and economic development. On the one hand, historic resources can be valorised to facilitate revenue generation and economic growth through tourism, real estate development and place marketing. The commercial use of historic assets thus can promote local socio-economic development. Heritage resources and their conservation sometimes have acted as, or been part of, urban regeneration or rural revitalisation schemes in that they have become integral with neoliberal strategies to improve the competitiveness of places in the global capitalist economy (Harvey, 2005). On the other hand, commercial activities may damage historic resources, through physical damage caused by tourist use or through commoditization, trivialisation and standardisation (Ho & McKercher, 2004). Yet, attempts to preserve local historic resources that deny socio-economic development can condemn places to economic impoverishment (Yang, Wall, & Smith, 2008). The commercial use of heritage may also be considered necessary in order to generate the funding required to protect it (Chhabra, 2009). As Timothy (2007, p. xvi) notes: "Without an

economic justification, conservation policies and practices in many places would not be established or justified in the minds of community members and leaders". Thus, the use of heritage for tourism and related commercial activities can involve mutual benefits, but it may also entail trade-offs and the loss of irreplaceable features of our past.

There are numerous studies illustrating specific places where either heritage conservation or tourism growth has taken precedence (McKercher & du Cros, 2002; McKercher, Ho, & du Cros, 2005), and it is important to provide sound explanations of the processes behind those outcomes. This paper examines governance processes that affect relations between heritage protection and tourism-related economic growth. It considers the relative priority given to heritage and to tourism, and the potential tensions and mutual benefits between them. It is set in the context of China, with its distinctive and rapidly evolving socio-economic and political system. It is, therefore, of both global relevance and of special relevance to China (Sofield & Li, 2011).

The concept of governance concerns how societies are governed, ruled or "steered", and thus it involves the processes for regulating and mobilising social action and for producing social order (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Such regulation and mobilisation usually involves collective action and coordination, with heritage protection often depending on such collective responses. Governance is considered to be broader than government, in recognition that often it is not just the formal agencies of government that are

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involved in the coordinating tasks of governance: business, community and other actors potentially can also be involved. In recent years increasingly complex multi-agency governance patterns have emerged in many developed economies, including in relation to heritage (Jessop, 2008; Wu, 2002). Governance can be characterised by more diffuse policy networks and markets, as found in many advanced capitalist nations, or by a comparatively dominant hierarchical state, as occurs in China (Bevir, 2009).

This paper explores how governance can affect the relative priorities at heritage sites given to heritage protection or conservation and to tourism-related economic development. It uses the theoretical lens of political economy, drawing on ideas developed by Karl Marx (1818–1883), political economist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), and more recently by sociologist Bob Jessop (1946–). In political economy, the social system is considered to constitute a whole, so society's varied aspects are parts of the whole (Bramwell, 2011; Mosedale, 2011). The driving forces of change in the social system relate to oppositions and conflicts within and between the elements of this whole. This approach suggests that the political sphere associated with governance is strongly related to the economic, social and cultural spheres. Political economy emphasises how economic relations can influence other social, cultural and political relationships, including governance.

Political economy is used in this paper to examine the governance of heritage and tourism in the West Lake historic district on the east edge of Hangzhou's city centre, in east China. Hangzhou is a major city located only 150 km from Shanghai, with a population of over six million people. A large lake dominates West Lake historic district, but it also includes numerous religious, cultural and historical sites. The landscape of lake, hills and historical sites has evolved over many centuries and it conforms to traditional Chinese aesthetics as highly harmonised (Sofield & Li, 2011; UNESCO, 2008). This complex landscape is well known in China, but it is increasingly threatened by tourism and other commercial pressures. Hangzhou is a major tourism centre in China, and West Lake has been its iconic draw card. There is growing recognition of the importance of protecting West Lake's heritage, but there is also much emphasis on its tourism value and its positive image for Hangzhou as an economic centre. The study focuses on two specific heritage schemes at West Lake: Mei Jia Wu Tea Area and Leifeng Pagoda.

The case assessed here, therefore, is in a socialist country with a Communist Party-led state and a socio-economic system that combines capitalism and socialism (White, 2002). The continuity of the Chinese Communist Party's rule and of socialist principles and political institutions is a striking feature of contemporary China (Sun, 2008). Authority in China is "derived ultimately from a single, exceedingly centralised source on high" (Shue, 2008, p. 141), so that the central state and Communist Party are highly influential. But even here local government and other actors have scope to influence governance processes (Yan & Bramwell, 2008). This dispersal of governance was encouraged by reforms begun by Deng Xiaoping's 1978 "Open Door" policies, which retained the Communist Party and the state's dominance, but led to capitalism's dramatic growth and increasing decentralisation in policy making. The study focuses in this political system on how and why governance decisions were made associated with the relative priority given to heritage protection and tourism-related economic growth at Hangzhou's West Lake. It is important to understand how China's distinctive socio-economic and political system affects governance decisions concerning heritage-tourism relations. These decisions are of major significance as China has rapidly become the fourth most visited international destination in the world, while its domestic tourism industry is perhaps unrivalled (Sofield & Li, 2011).

The study explains, first, the political economy approach used to analyse the governance of heritage protection and tourism-related

economic development at West Lake. Second, it explores Hangzhou's economic and political circumstances that helped shape policy priorities for heritage and tourism in the two West Lake schemes under scrutiny. It considers, third, the actors involved in the schemes' governance, their power relations and their influence on policy making. Fourth, it details whether and how the schemes' policy makers privileged heritage protection or economic development. There is consideration, finally, of whether views about using heritage and tourism in the schemes were shared by powerful and less influential groups.

2. Political economy, governance and heritage-tourism relations

The political economy approach provides distinctive perspectives on the objectives of government policies for heritage protection and tourism development.

Marx famously argued that market forces are inherently unstable. This was because they lead to capital over-accumulation and thus to periodic crises, and also because they encourage unstable social relations and conflicts. In political economy the governance institutions, and notably the state, are considered to be important in regulating the economic and political system in order to mitigate the contradictions and crises created by market forces, and to promote the system's reproduction (Bevir, 2009; Cornelissen, 2011; Peet, 2007). A key role for the state is intervention to encourage the conditions for capital accumulation and economic expansion (Bevir, 2009). At the same time, the state seeks to ensure it maintains its ability adequately to reflect the popular will (Goodwin & Painter, 1996; Peck & Tickell, 1992). If the state lacks legitimacy, then sustained economic activity is hampered. Purcell and Nevins (2005, pp. 212–13) suggest that "In order to maintain political legitimacy and effective authority over its people, the state must reproduce a politically stable relationship between the state and citizen".

Political economy suggests that the state can tend to give priority to the economy as this produces the wealth which provides income for the state and also for the population that provides the state's political support (Jessop, 2008). Thus, the state may often intervene in favour of economic over heritage conservation priorities (Harvey, 2010). When priority is given to economic growth through tourism then heritage protection may be neglected or traded-off.

Political economy also indicates why the state may intervene to promote heritage conservation and to protect heritage from damaging tourism development. One explanation is that the state may decide to protect heritage resources from tourism activities if it is considered that their loss or deterioration may reduce the potential for present and future rounds of capital accumulation (While, Jonas, & Gibbs, 2010). Market forces can make actors focus on short-term economic returns to the detriment of heritage conservation, even if the heritage resources are required to sustain future economic returns, and thus this can prompt government intervention (although the state may also focus on securing immediate economic returns). Another explanation for state-sponsored heritage protection is that there is usually an expectation that government will intervene to avert major damage to society's historical and cultural assets, not least to promote the state's political and cultural legitimacy and to maintain its authority (Harvey, 1996). In practice the state will usually intervene to secure some sort of balance between economic development and heritage protection because this is likely to gain quite wide support, although this intervention will impinge on the interests of some groups and thus it may result in conflict.

Political economy, secondly, provides distinctive perspectives on the policy processes affecting heritage-tourism relations. It suggests, for example, that often there are several agents seeking to influence

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