Original article

Is UNESCO World Heritage recognition a blessing or burden? Evidence from developing Asian countries

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

To both acknowledge and protect many cultural heritage expressions, sites and practices, UNESCO has instituted three conventions; Tangible Heritage, Intangible Heritage and Diversity of Cultural Expression. If a site/practice receives this UNESCO badge, it is an acknowledgment of its universal cultural and/or natural value as well as recognition of the need to protect it from harm. However, the UNESCO badge is an important marketing tool in world tourism and its presence ensures many more visitors to a site/practice that is UNESCO recognised. With increasing wealth and mobility, many more people are travelling than was possible even a decade ago. Increasing numbers of visitors can negatively impact on a site/practice as well as affect the local culture and integrity of a region, particularly in developing countries. So, is the UNESCO recognition a blessing or burden? This paper addresses the challenges that ensue from the UNESCO conventions by considering three UNESCO World Heritage case study sites in Asian developing countries. In particular, it seeks to understand the extent to which UNESCO's World Heritage approach protects or further undermines the cultural heritage sustainability of these sites.

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone. . .*
Joni Mitchell, *Big Yellow Taxi*

1. Introduction

Part of the mandate of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is to protect man-made treasures that exist in our world. Three conventions passed by the UNESCO to ensure this are titled:

- Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972);
- Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003);
- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression (2005) [1].

In UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) under Article 2 it notes,

"'Safeguarding' means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage." [1].

So here is the dilemma. While there is the acknowledgement of the need to 'protect' the tangible and intangible cultural heritage[1] in this clause, at the same time there is a desire to make it 'viable' and 'revitalise' it. This could be seen as a way of making a site/culture come alive and not be a 'museum' or it could be interpreted as a way of economically exploiting the site/culture while trying to maintain its unique characteristics. Another dimension, however,

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[1] In this article, we refer to the concept of heritage in its dual character: tangible and intangible as cultural sites can be the expression not just of the tangible but also of the intangible dimension of cultural heritage. Cultural sites are a clear expression of tangible cultural heritage, meanwhile they can embody intangible practices that cannot be dissociated from its tangible dimension. An uncontrolled tourism valorization of the cultural site, which may turn to a more or less severe exploitation of the tangible site in the short, medium or long term, may affect seriously both dimensions.

is the philosophy behind the awarding of the UNESCO status and the interests it serves. For instance, Frey and Steiner [2] observe that the UNESCO Conventions have so far mostly benefited the more affluent nations. This is also noted by Bertacchini et al. [3]. Pyykkö-nen [4] discusses the UNESCO Convention on Cultural expression as another example of the 'commodification' of culture while D'Eramo [5] asserts that receiving UNESCO heritage status is the 'death knell' of a city/place.

Within Article 13 of the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention, there is a recommendation to States (Nations) awarded that they should:

"[. . .] adopt a general policy aimed at promoting the function of the intangible cultural heritage in society, and at integrating the safeguarding of such heritage into planning programmes." [1].

This says clearly that on the awarding of Intangible Heritage Status there is an obligation by the State to introduce various measures to allow for proper planning as part of the safeguarding of the practices.

However, the awarding of an UNESCO status immediately bestows a national and international profile on the site or practice. While the recognition acknowledges something that it is unique in the world, it also draws the world's attention to this uniqueness. Depending on the nature of the site/heritage/practice, it is then in an excellent position to be marketed by the nation concerned as a special and attractive tourist destination. It is noted that,

"Being in the UNESCO List is highly desired by many actors as it brings prominence and monetary revenue [. . .]" ([2]: 560).

It is seen as an avenue for increased revenue, notably from tourism, but also from various agencies that provide much needed funds to poorer nations for restoration or conservation processes. The visitors may bring economic prosperity to a community that was formerly subsistent, yet their presence may simultaneously destroy or undermine unique features of the local culture. Over time, a co-dependent economic relationship between the community and the tourists develops so that the community cannot survive without the presence of the tourists. Ironically, this then affects the attractions of the destination as it is increasingly given over to serving the needs of the tourist, and by doing, loses its intrinsic difference or local culture.

Moreover, greater wealth and cheaper travel have enabled the numbers of people travelling around the world to grow exponentially. Gonzalez-Tirados [6] observes that from 1950 to 2008, the number of world-wide tourists increased from 25 million to 924 million ([6]: 1589). Many of these visitors are in large groups and herded from one destination to another with little local engagement or understanding. In addition, hotels, casinos and resorts are then built near these significant sites for the tourists' accommodation and entertainment. Other forms of infrastructure development follow quickly; major roads, shops, bars, restaurants, etc. Often the local residents become entirely dependent on tourism for making their living and their former local trades, occupations and industries fall by the wayside [7]. Tourism changes the nature of the destination dramatically and probably irreversibly. Kishore Rau, Director General of the UNESCO World Heritage (WH) Centre has commented that:

"In tandem with this recognition of our heritage – and the appeal of these sites often enhanced by World Heritage inscription – the tourism industry has exploded at a phenomenal rate, resulting in unprecedented numbers of visitors to sites both accessible and remote, compounding the issue of preserving sites even as we express our appreciation for them" ([8]: 2).

The potential negative impact of increased tourism is acknowledged here by Rau [8]. But there is an inherent contradiction in the position of UNESCO when they are aware of the dangers of increased promotion of a site, despite the damage that occurs. If on one side, UNESCO's objective is to preserve the natural and cultural (tangible and intangible) heritage of outstanding relevance for the future generations, on the other, the UNESCO assignment is also to promote "an appropriate equitable balance between conservation, sustainability and development" (Budapest Declaration [9]) in the UNESCO sites. The success of this initiative relies though on the degree of engagement and awareness of the local community [10]. In reviewing the management processes of six world cultural heritage sites, Landorf [11] notes that they rarely factor in consultation or broader sustainability issues. Perhaps an inherent danger in the awarding of UNESCO Status is that it takes the planning and control away from the local community so that the locale becomes a 'plaything' for national and international interests. The community can then be excluded permanently from the conversation. This is further noted by Salazar [12] where it is observed that the challenge is to match the demands of tourism to local needs, while making it sustainable and viable. Tourism has many facets that not only directly affect a cultural heritage site but the entire community and environment that surrounds it. It is for these reasons that we focus on the impact of tourism on UNESCO cultural heritage sites, seeing its uncontrolled expansion as a threat to their short and long-term sustainability.

2. Research aims

This article aims first to develop state of the art concepts addressing sustainability, cultural tourism and UNESCO WH status, and to understand to what extent the UNESCO's WH approach – as presented in its main conventions previously mentioned – protect or further undermine the tangible and intangible cultural heritage sustainability of some sites in Asian developing countries. As researchers, we combine the perspectives of a cultural policy specialist and a cultural heritage specialist to investigate this hypothesis. Indeed, most of the literature in this area comes from the tourism field, which generally has a vested interest in the maintenance of that tourism. But for those of us in the cultural field, the preservation of unique cultures and protection of cultural sites is quite critical. So how do we address the conundrum of wanting to protect destinations that are unique and of universal value, and yet allow the local community to economically survive? How do we maintain 'difference' under the force of the explosion of visitation and pressure to serve the needs of the tourist? How are unique cultures protected when every day they are being pressured to become the same as others? These are all challenging questions for which there may not be a simple answer, but as cultural policy and heritage scholars it is important that we explore them and consider options that go further than the UNESCO badge.

The article is structured as follows. Section 3 presents a critical literature review of the main relevant concepts to our study (tourism impact on local community and UNESCO World Heritage – from here on WH – tourism). Section 4 focuses on the challenges characterizing some UNESCO WH in Asia. Section 5 concludes and provides some suggestions for further research.

3. Literature review

3.1. Tourism impact on local community

The first wave of studies analysing the relationship between tourism and local community date back to the 1970s. To analyse the relationship between local perceptions of tourism development, several theoretical models have been developed over time. These include Doxey's Irridex model [13], Butler's tourism area