

Importance of tourism authorities in developing festivals



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Using case studies of your choice examine the importance of tourism authorities in the developing, rejuvenating and rehabilitating of festivals.

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2007, online) suggests that “ Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes”, it has implications on the economy, natural and built environment, local population at the destination and the tourists themselves.

Within the “ Tourism” sector, Cros and Mckercher (2012, p1) identifies activities such as visiting historic sites, cultural landmarks, attending special events and festivals, or visiting museums as part of what is generally referred nowadays as “ Cultural Tourism”. It is recognized to be a form of special interest tourism, where culture forms the basis of either attracting tourists or motivating people to travel (McIntosh and Goeldner 1990; Zeppel 1992; Ap 1999). It has also been conceptualised from a business perspective as involving the development and marketing of various sites or attractions for foreign as well as domestic tourists (Goodrich 1997).

In various countries, “ Cultural Tourism” plays a vital part in developing economy and building up national image. Tourism authorities are founded with missions to formulate policy and coordinate, generate tourist awareness, organise fairs and festivals (Nagaland Tourism, 2018, online), promote tourism, accommodate tourists and maintain tourist locations and accommodations (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2018, online), as well as to manage major national culture activities, guide the literary and artistic

undertakings and protect intangible cultural heritage (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2018, online).

This essay aims to examine the importance of these tourism authorities in the developing, rejuvenating and rehabilitating of festivals that are regarded as a major element in Cultural Tourism. The Hornbill festival in northeast India, the Songkran Festival in Thailand and the Dragon Boat Festival in the city of Lianyungang in China will be used as the focus of study, followed by a discussion on issues relating to authenticity in tourism.

To begin with, the three key verbs “develop”, “rejuvenate” and “rehabilitate” in the essay question need to be defined. Literally, according to both the Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries, “develop” has the meaning of “to invent something or bring something into existence”, or similarly, “to grow or cause to grow or change into a more advanced form”. Applying that to festival, it means a festival is brought to life by a tourism authority. As for “rejuvenate”, it implies “to make something more effective, modern, and successful by using new ideas and methods” or “to improve the way it works or looks and make it seem fresh”. Therefore, to “rejuvenate a festival” indicates a festival is refreshed or modernised by a public authority. As for “rehabilitate”, it underlines “to return something to its former condition” or “to restore to former privileges or reputation after a period of disfavour”, which when applied to festival, refers to a festival is rescued by a tourist authority from a difficult situation and is put back in its original shape.

The analysis will be embarked with the importance of the Nagaland Tourism in developing the Hornbill Festival. Geographically, Nagaland lies in the

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corner of northeast India, bordering Myanmar, and is isolated from the other parts of India both politically and culturally. It consists of eight states and is home to sixteen tribes. The origin of its renowned Hornbill Festival is believed to be related to an event called Naga Week in 1995, which was firmly associated with the indigenous peoples movement and what it means to be “indigenous” (Longkumer, 2016, p219-220). It was not formally turned into an international event until the year 2000, when the Nagaland government determined to set a weeklong festival to coincide with the celebration of Nagaland Statehood Day on 1st December. A Naga Heritage Village was also established to uphold and sustain the distinct identity of dialects, customs and traditions of all the ethnic tribes of Nagaland.

Normally, the Hornbill Festival happens as Falassi (1987, p1-10) suggests, “time out of time”, which is not so much to be perceived and measured in days or hours, but to be divided internally by what happens within it from its beginning to its end, with rites of conspicuous display, consumption, dramas, exchange and competition. The festival starts with a grand opening ceremony, followed by a traditional Naga chant, then a wide variety of performances and mini-events such as fashion shows, car rallies, book festival, rock shows, horticultural stalls, exhibitions and a children’s carnival. There are also numerous stalls that serve local food, beverages and sell Naga products. The main focus of the festival are the dancing, singing and story-telling performance delivered by all of the sixteen tribes in the amphitheatre. Some occasional demonstrations might also happen in the traditional morung, where chances to interact with the performers are available (Longkumer, 2016, p220-221).

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From the official statement of the Nagaland Tourism (2018, online), “ Heritage Village serves as a healthy sign, vision and encouragement for uniting the various tribes of Nagaland to showcase their rich cultural heritage and tradition under the aegis of ‘ Hornbill Festival’”, it is showed that “ tradition”, “ unity” and “ diversity” are valued. “ The idea is to show the next generation the ‘ tradition’, allowing them to appreciate and see them.” “ A group of performers from the Pochury tribe from the eastern Nagaland in 2007 said that they came to the festival to participate in the larger notion of ‘ Naganess’ and to interact and visualise the ‘ Naga people as one’” (Longkumer, 2016, p222). Even though it was founded that many local visitors concerned more about the food and social exchange, while some national or international visitors came solely for the search of exoticism which arouse debates on authenticity of the festival that will be further elaborated later, the significance of the Nagaland Tourism in bringing the Hornbill Festival into existence and in growing it into a global event should be recognised. The festival undoubtedly turned December the busiest month of a year in Nagaland, according to the official tourist inflow statistic 2017 (Nagaland Tourism, 2018, online), and is believed to bring a significant return to the local economy. In the meantime, both the locals and tourists are largely benefited from the social and cultural exchanges.

Likewise, in another Asian country Thailand, the Songkran Festival has long been in the limelight since 1990s thanks to continuous effort paid by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Originally, Songkran is the Thai form of the Sanskrit sankranta, meaning passage or change, and the emphasis of Songkran celebrations was based on the Buddhist cultural inheritance of the

region (Newbold, 2016, p229). During the festival period, people used to visit temples, build sand pagodas, release creatures like fishes and birds as an act of merit-making, and sprinkle families or close friends with small bowls of “blessed water” for luck and prosperity. The festival was rather low-key, local and family celebration based.

Its nature began to evolve when the TAT adopted a proactive approach in marketing the festival into Thailand’s key attraction. “In the period from the 1990s Porananond and Robinson observe not only a shift from the private to the public nature of the festival, and a change in the economic emphasis of the festival, but it is at this point that they address some ‘key’ changes in the practices of Songkran, in particular the change from placid water throwing to industrial water-fights, accompanied by loud music and large pickup trucks transporting water tanks for the continual throwing of water” (Newbold, 2016, p232). These changes which outgrew the festival’s origins, albeit boosted Thailand’s tourism outrageously, at the same time brought a series of health, safety, environment and reputation concerns against Thailand. The festival became a double-edged sword that made the country an attractive holiday destination, but also a “hub of the water party with booze and a high death toll” (Newbold, 2016, p233).

In response to the problems, the TAT started to re-emphasise the “cultural” and “traditional” aspects of the festivals, along side with a range of new laws and declarations announced by the local government from 2010s. Mr. Yuthasak Supasorn, TAT Governor, said: “Songkran is one of Thailand’s most important festivals. It is a time when families celebrate with centuries-old traditions, returning to their family homes for three to five days of making
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merit and water splashing ceremonies, which invokes sins being washed away with scented water” (TAT Newsroom, 2018, online). It is recognisable that the TAT intends to bring people attention back to the “ nostalgic time-honoured rituals” instead of the “ modern-stereotyped water fight”.

In this case, it reflects that the TAT has been playing an important role in refreshing and modernising the Songkran Festival, which is crucial in the process of rejuvenation. Regardless of the critics in opposition to the TAT’s market-orientated approach and all of the contradictions between authenticity and secularization, which will be discussed later, the authority’s continuous contributions in popularising the Songkran festival should never be neglected. The celebrations of Songkran are now not only well known within Thailand, but also around the globe.

Proceeding to the case in China, celebrations on the Dragon Boat and many others traditional festivals ceased due to the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) under Mao Zedong’s leadership. “ Localism”, “ traditional culture” and the “ freedom of travel” were all disapproved of or actively suppressed during the revolution period (Newbold and Xiang, 2016, p239). The “ Four Olds” including “ old thought”, “ old culture”, “ old customs” and “ old practices” were targeted for a complete destruction (Yan, Kao and Kwok, 1996, p65), and the historic Dragon Boat Festival, which associated to the ancient story of the poet and minister Qu Yuan, as well as some summer solstice celebrations, was clearly not exempted. It was not until the reforms started by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s that the Chinese social customs and festival came alive again. The support for the re-invigorating of a festival tradition in China has been made official since 2004, when Vice Minister of <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-tourism-authorities-in-developing-festivals/>

Culture Zhou called on Chinese youth to uphold traditional festivals on the basis of the “ encroaching values and lifestyles of developed countries” (Newbold and Xiang, 2016, p241), which hinted the threat of western festival culture in contemporary China.

As Wang et al. (2014) identify, traditional Chinese festivals are confronted with five major issues involving “ lack of core modern values”, “ loss of emotional experience identity”, “ missing of traditional folk arts”, “ confusion around the application of festival symbols” and “ popularity of western festival culture”. Besides, traditional festive symbols are commercialised by the consumption market while the founding spirits, emotions and cultural connections are usually ignored with or without intention.

Example as in Lianyungang, a prefecture-level city in northeastern China, the Lianyungang Dragon Boat Festival is regarded as a highlight in the region. The Municipal Government packaged it with the newly invented “ The Journey to the West Cultural Festival” and “ The Summer of Lianyungang Festival” as major celebrations to attract tourists. Typical elements of the festival such as “ Zongzi” (traditional Chinese rice-pudding), “ dragon boat racing” and some folk practices originated from the ancient seasonality activities in summer solstice, are all incorporated in the official celebrating events, with aims to build a tourist strand to their economic development, to protect Chinese culture and to defend national identity.

It is evidenced that the tourism authority, which is the mentioned Lianyungang Municipal Government, made an attempt in restoring the Dragon Boat Festival to its former condition in a certain extent, despite the

intention. Here, the authenticity of the festival itself is again in doubt because of various economic and modernity concerns, nonetheless, the importance of Lianyungang Municipal Government in rehabilitating the Dragon Boat Festival need to be acknowledged. The festival is at least being re-celebrated again among locals and tourists, and perceived as a popular sporting event because of the dragon boat races.

From the cases of the Hornbill Festival, the Songkran Festival and the Dragon Boat Festival, it is apparent that concerns over authenticity versus economy, exoticism, secularisation and modernity aroused. Many troubled “authenticity”, explained by Getz (1994, p411) as “genuine, unadulterated or the ‘real thing’”, is sacrificed for the sake of tourism development. However, Cros and Mckercher (2012, p27, 41-42) reinforce that by nature, tourism is “a commercial activity”, “involves the consumption of experiences”, “entertainment” and “a demand-driven activity that is difficult to control”. Also, they relieve tourists want authenticity but not necessarily reality. Authenticity lies in the eyes of the consumer and they often satisfy a nostalgic need for the past but are not necessarily true to it. Additionally, Wang (1999) elaborates authenticity could be categorised as objective, constructive or existential, and so not an absolute point of origin could be identified. As suggested by Newbold (2016, p203), case studies demonstrates festivals are evolutionary, “they develop and change, adapting to outside forces as well as local changes, such that a discussion of authenticity in the context of many contemporary festivals may well be illusory”.

To conclude, tourism authorities in India, Thailand and China, namely the Nagaland Tourism, the TAT and the Lianyungang Municipal Government, have been respectively playing a contributing role in the development of the Hornbill Festival, the rejuvenation of the Songkran Festival and the rehabilitation of the Dragon Boat Festival. The Hornbill Festival was brought to life with positive social, cultural and economic impacts made to the locals, Nagaland and the tourists. Parts of the indigenous tradition were kept and passed on to the younger generations, cultural exchanges are encouraged while national identity is reaffirmed. Similarly, the Songkran Festival was modernised from a low-key, local and family based celebration, to a world famous gala that is jointly celebrated by the locals and the tourists. It is also noticeable that the TAT has been constantly evaluating and adjusting their approach for celebrations, which is essential in the process of rejuvenation. Last but not least, the Dragon Boat Festival in China was given a new life after the Cultural Revolution and is now a city's highlight, a sport event as well as a home and family celebration, thanks to the Lianyungang Municipal Government. Therefore, in spite of the fact that controversies over authenticity versus economy, exoticism, secularisation and modernity do exist as discussed, the importance of all those tourism authorities should still be acknowledged.

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