

Gazing at our heritage: Chinese tourists' consumption of Mount Lushan heritage space

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Introduction

Whilst consumer researchers have acknowledged the significance of space through studies that have examined the spatial dynamics in consumption contexts such as online health experiences (Laing et al, 2009), ethical and green decisions (Chatzidakis et al., 2012) and the spa space for men (Petrylaite and Hart, 2021), it is noted that spatial perspectives remain relatively absent within consumer research literature (Chatzidakis and McEachern, 2018), which may be due to the difficulty associated with “space” and its unique qualities. Macciell and Wallendorf, (2021) call for further applications of space to understand how “market space shapes and is being shaped by consumer identities and their practices within specific geographies” (p.46). Therefore, this research study responds to these calls by adopting a very specific geography in the form of a heritage tourist space in China, known as Mount Lushan and looks at how space is utilized by consumers (tourists of the location) for their identity projects using Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad.

Space and Consumption

Space has been a topic of interest for consumer researchers for some time. Kozinets et al. (2002) highlighted the role of the flagship store space in consumer and brand relationships. Maclaran and Brown (2005) showed how shopping mall space can be utilised by management to co-op consumer activism. Recently, Skandalis et al. (2018) investigated how consumers develop and perform music taste and identities through the consumption of popular and classical music places. While these studies all contribute to our understanding of the relationship between space and consumption, there is still evidently a dearth of research in the area and we believe that consumer research will also benefit from more applications of space, using Lefevre’s (1991) spatial triad.

The “production of space” first emerged in the seminal work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) in the arena of urban studies and sociology. It focuses on the assertion that social space is a social product and process relating to three concepts: “perceived”, “conceived,” and “lived” space (Prigge, 2008). *Perceived space* is the subjective experience of space, shaped by individual’s senses as well as their perception of the space as a product of social, cultural, and economic factors. *Conceived space* refers to the space as it is designed and represented by institutions and powerful actors. In terms of consumption, conceived space can help explain how individuals create meanings and associations with products and brands. *Lived space* is lived in and experienced by individuals and communities, which enable them to create their own meaning and engage in social relations. It clarifies how consumers engage in social relations and consumption practices to construct their identity projects.

Yang and Qian (2022) analysed the production of space in concentrated resettlement communities in China and found that strict planning resulted in restricted reproduction of the space to enable their adaptation. Castilhos (2019) used Lefevre’s (1991) triad to understand the dynamics of a marketplace that produces a city space that excludes the lower-class groups. More recently, Petrylaite and Hart (2021) made use of Lefebvre’s (1991) triad to analyse the interplay between gender, space, and consumption in men’s consumption of the spa spaces. They find that there is a reciprocal relationship between the production of space and gender, and consumption construction; and highlight the interconnectedness of the three constructs in the triad. Yet, consumer research that has examined the consumption of tourism

heritage spaces and how these spaces impact the identity projects of consumers of these spaces, using Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualization of space, has been scarce.

Consumption of Tourist spaces and Identity

Tourist identity is dependent on social and cultural context, and is shaped by a variety of factors, including the media, tourism industry, and cultural traditions (Urry, 1990). A tourist's identity will be implicated by the tourist-host relationship and exchange as well (Tucker, 2003). For instance, Stronza (2008) found how the interactions between locals and tourists have contributed to changing perceptions of nativity. Recently, Ourahmoune (2016) studied identity transformations in tourists, and highlighted the relevance of temporality. Andrews (2011) states that "what Lefebvre's triad offers is "a possibility of becoming" (p.30), which will inevitably transform identity projects (Crouch and Lubben, 2003). Therefore, we look to address this shortcoming within the field of consumer research by adopting Lefebvre's (1991) framework to examine the Mount Lushan Heritage space and identifying how the consumption of this heritage space impacts identity projects through the perceived, conceived and lived aspects of this heritage space.

Methodology

Mount Lushan as a Heritage Space

Mount Lushan is in Jiujiang city, (China) and covers an area of 913 KM². As a heritage site it is famous for its symbiotic state as a beautiful natural landscape, with rich humanistic resources (Peng and Chen, 2020). It is the only scenic heritage space in China with an independent administrative town (Kuling Town) on the top of the mountain. In fact, the town in the clouds has developed into a community of 12,000 people who are pivotal to the heritage space experience (Li et al., 2018). Tracing back to the history of 200 BC, Mount Lushan is seen as a religious, educational, political, and cultural mountain. It not only embodies multiple religions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Catholicism, Orthodox, and Islam (Li, 2015) but also reserves the White Deer Cave Academy, the central educational institution of Confucianism in the Song dynasty (Wang, 2017). Besides, Lushan is the birthplace of the Chinese 'landscape culture (also named recluse culture)' that attracted spiritual leaders, scholars, artists, and writers for over 2000 years. There are numerous symbolic poems, calligraphies, paintings, and cliff inscriptions (Song, 2015). Consequently, it is the "summer capital" of the Jiangjieshi Government where many Chinese nationals visit. Furthermore, 600 Lushan villas were built since 1895 and are products of British colonisation (Huang, 2014), which reflect the blending of Chinese and Western aesthetic ideas (Chen and Fang, 2018).

This study adopts a multi-method interpretive research design, including observations, netnography and face-to-face semi-structured interviews relating to the case study site. Data was collected in two key stages. During the first phase 15 observations were conducted, alongside participant observation where one of the researchers participated in 10 group Tours. The tour around the heritage space would typically take as long two hours to two days from the start till the end, allowing the researcher to fully immerse themselves in the tourist experience. Alongside this, the researcher also observed **24 online travellers** and investigated their in-depth experience of Lushan in the last 3 years. The researcher analysed the contents of each individual from the perspectives of their experiences, the experience attributes, the observations of the symbols and personal meanings to compare them with the themes obtained by observation methods. Phase two consisted of 32 qualitative interviews

(three of which were a part of the pilot study). Of which 29 were used as data for this study, as some of the informants chose to withdraw during the interview for personal reasons.

Findings

Taking into consideration Lefebvre's (1991) triad of space, the research data demonstrates that Chinese tourists felt that the consumption of the Mount Lushan heritage site impacted their sense of self and identity projects. In fact, it was a space and place that was reminiscent of what once was, which encouraged them to reflect on who they are now through the symbolic and experiential consumption of this space. We have identified the triad to be interconnected at Mount Lushan and we highlighted (1) the consumption and perceptions of this space as enabling connection with heritage (2) the conceived space as imagining and performing the past in the present (3) the lived space as a departure from sterile heritage to a more hybrid one as well as teaching and instilling heritage to future generations.

Perceptions of space: One with nature, one with heritage

Mount Lushan's iconic landscape (i.e., natural landscape, architectural space, stone sculptures) bears symbolic significance to traditional Chinese heritage with Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist references and alluding to spiritual Utopia pursued by Ancient Chinese elites. Unique architectural style and design illustrate that tourists consume the beauty of "the exotic landscape (02IM)" in Lushan. Influenced by traditional philosophy, Chinese aesthetics emphasize expressing the relationship between personal affections and nature rather than objectively investigating and describing the details of the landscapes (M. Li, 2015). Chinese people hold the philosophical stand of 'Oneness with Nature' (Han, 2018) and 'harmony between man with nature' (Yau, 1988; Zhang, 2017). Hence, tourists are "spiritually immersed in nature (Participant observation Mr Fan)" and feel "the deep integration of humans and nature (25IF)". Consequently, we find that through the physical attributes Lushan prompts tourists to dig into their Chinese cultural aesthetic genes, which dominate their gaze at natural landscapes, such as mountain ranges, lakes, and clouds.

The perceived Chinese heritage space and the social relations within it and around it are intertwined at Mount Lushan. As for some tourists the primary motivations for visiting were the social relations with the locals and what they represented i.e., a simpler way of life, whereas their lives were so busy and fast paced in cities' such as Beijing or Shanghai. Therefore, Mount Lushan was the ultimate space of reflection that felt like "home" for many. In fact, through the decoding and the attachment of meaning, consumers of this tourist site would fixate on being able to attach meanings to themselves and who they are, further reinforcing their attachment to specific sites within this space, but also taking the meaning as a contribution to the layers of their Chinese identity projects.

Conceived space: Appropriation of the past in the present

The conceived tourist space was very much about engaging with the past and the present, in terms of history, culture and familial ties. The historical and symbolic events that took place at Mount Lushan, along with historical memories of this tourist site contribute to the production of this tourist space, the feeling around it and what it represents. In fact, many of the Chinese tourists who visit this space spoke of how their memories of Mount Lushan influenced why they returned to this site year after year, almost encouraging them to reflect on who they were before.

Furthermore, as the Chinese gaze "Yi Jin" calls for beyond the three-dimensional space but the extension of the inner thoughts and illusions of the visitors, we find tourists perform and reproduce traditional acts and behaviours (which may be at odds with who they currently are) through engaging with the space. Such performativity is instrumental in instilling of the imagined traditional and historical identity. For instance, a tourist tried to make herself feel more aptly the spirit and character of historical figures by "*changing into Han costume (ancient costumes)*". She believed that traditional clothes can be used as a medium to connect her with the past, which made her better understand the feelings, choices, and characters of spiritual idols when they face life difficulties. This helped her to reflect on herself and anchor her identity in a system of traditional history and culture.

Furthermore, conceived space at Mount Lushan enables Chinese tourists to "*accumulate historical knowledge (20IM)*" and "*explore the truth of history (Online blog 23)*". This inquiring and learning happens via discourse that takes place at the locale and beyond, and fits with the Chinese concept of learning, which is, "以史为鉴 (take history as a mirror) (26IM)". Hence, we find informants reflect upon the experience of the heritage site in improving self-cognition and judgment.

Lived space: Departure from homogenous cultures and carrying over heritage.

Mount Lushan is not only a space of traditional Chinese heritage and history but also bears elements of modern culture influenced by western thoughts, locals' nostalgic culture and tourists' modern culture. Thus, the lived space at Mount Lushan forms a hybrid cultural space which presents landscape features with different cultural characteristics which are the profound accumulation of a long civilization. Tourists are "deeply attracted (01IF)" by the old villas "representing western culture (06IM)". From tourists' perspective, the buildings built with "unique decoration and structure (04IM)", adopt "beautiful colour (01IF)", "harmonious architectural proportion (01IF)", and "exquisite architectural details (03IF)", which are distinguished from traditional Chinese space. The online blog 13's description of Kuling Town (at Mount Lushan) reflects the mixture of heterogeneous cultures to some extent.

On one side is the luxurious and materialistic culture of modern society represented by tourists. On the other side is the simple and quiet nostalgic place that returns to the past represented by the locals. Two seemingly conflicting cultures coexist and collide in the same space, giving tourists the illusion of a "time tunnel". Another informant discussed her heterogeneous experience of the Chinese culture through Mount Lushan to create an authentic experience and reflection of identity.

Beyond the touristic experience of heritage, the lived space at Mount Lushan also provides an opportunity to pass on the cultural identity to next generations. The primary way of this cultural inheritance is learning in the heritage site through resources such as calligraphy, painting, poetry, history, and ancestral stories. Many tourists have affirmed that the vital motivation for bringing children to Lushan is to learn cultural traditions. One informant encouraged her grandson to touch the Lushan stone inscription to establish the connection between the boy and traditional culture through tactile and visual experience.

Therefore, Lushan Mountain has thousands of years of traditional cultural resources and provides an open experience platform for Chinese tourists. It encourages tourists to make

diversified use of its' cultural commodities', actively carry out heritage-related activities, negotiate their cultural identity and pass it on to the next generation.

Conclusions

This research study contributes to existing consumer research, by investigating the tourism experience of a Chinese heritage site and looking at its meaning construction within a physical and cultural context that is under investigated within consumer research. Notably, tourists can also contribute to their cultural identity through aesthetic appreciation of natural landscapes from a Chinese way. This is due to the rich traditional spiritual culture nested and integrated into the Lushan natural landscapes in poetry, calligraphy, celebrity stories and philosophy. Chinese tourists prefer to imagine intangible culture when gazing at the tangible space, which is consistent with the view of Vecco (2010), Yu & Xu (2019) and Xu, Taylor & Feng (2020). The conceived space at Mount Lushan proves a portal for imagination and reappropriation of the past, in terms of history, culture and familial ties. The historical and symbolic events that took place at Mount Lushan, along with historical memories of this tourist site contribute to the production of this tourist space, the feeling around it and what it represents. The lived space of Mount Lushan was a departure from romanticised Chinese heritage to a more nuanced hybrid understanding of history and ancestry. This juxtaposition of real and imagined heritage enabled our informants to adapt their ethnic selves accordingly. Furthermore, beyond the touristic attraction, Mount Lushan's lived space provided a portal for consumers to teach future generations about their heritage and contribute to their identity projects.

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Spatial Triad at Mount Lushan and its impact of Chinese identity projects

Spatial construct	Representation at Mount Lushan	Exemplary quotes	Exemplary pictures	
Perceived space	Physical and natural beauty evoking Chinese gaze	"This is the uncanny quality of nature... clouds and mountains, people and cities... are connected... They maintain a delicate balance... in harmony. (11IF)"		<div data-bbox="1541 419 1933 512" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">The hazy beauty of peaks in clouds (online blog 07)</div>  <div data-bbox="1200 738 1541 842" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">A magical moment that can't be recorded 251F</div>
Conceived space	Accumulate knowledge of heritage through discourse and imagining past in the present	<p><i>"It is significant to the place where the historical events took place... As it enriches self-cognition... The historical details here are rich and multi-faceted... This way, my understanding of historical events will be more comprehensive, not just as advertised by the media, newspapers, and television... In this way, I will not stay at the surface of the issues but rather my judgment (20IM)."</i></p> <p>Informants defined the atmosphere in mount Lushan to be <i>"combining dream and prosperity as one (12IM)"</i> and encourage them to appreciate beautiful things in life in a slow and relaxed state which were <i>"once ignored"</i>.</p>		 <div data-bbox="1200 1257 1541 1380" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">文本框 Flower path, a memorial to the poet Bai Juyi (11IF)</div> <div data-bbox="1563 1257 2007 1380" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">Tourists dress up as an ancient recluse (Online blog 07)</div>

<p>Lived space</p>	<p>Juxtaposition of modern and the traditional as authenticating the experience and carrying over heritage</p>	<p><i>"An interesting phenomenon can be seen in Kuling street. Local tea farmers or villagers who are carrying burdens and wearing simple clothes pass by with modern fashionistas." (Online blog 13)</i></p> <p><i>"This is a Prussian-style villa... God, there was a German family who lived here a century ago! It seems that I have had an inexplicable time-space communication with them... it bonds history with me... It is quite wonderful... So, the journey adds something different, which is the most beautiful thing in Lushan." (17IF)</i></p> <p><i>"I would like him to know the wisdom of Chinese people and craftsmen..... We travelled around with him to experience Chinese civilisation. During the journey, I will explain the historical events hoping to gradually cultivate him with culture, which will greatly benefit his growth.....This is a process of accumulation.....No matter what job he does when he grows up; he would know that we have such a vast and profound history."(18IF)</i></p>	 <p>A mixed cultural space of Kuling town (Photoed by Author)</p>  <p>A mother and child appreciate a Chinese painting together (Photoed by author)</p> <p>Informant encourages her grandson to touch the Chinese characters on the stone inscription (18IF)</p>
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