The past is a feline country? Cuteification-Value Nexus and World Heritage visitor engagement

Chin Ee Ong

School of Tourism Management, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China

Abstract

Purpose – This paper responds to the lack of visitor engagement in many culture-based World Heritage sites and conceptualises a "Cuteification-Value Nexus" for the discussion of the communication of heritage values through "cute" or aesthetically pleasing popular culture elements. It reflects on observations in Macao to argue for a greater engagement of culture-based World Heritage sites through a combination of popular culture inspired motifs and truthful heritage messages. Specifically, it identifies a form of "cuteified heritage" – a hyperreal cultural zone that happens away from the actual heritage sites, but which articulates the heritage significances of those sites. This draws on concepts on themed spaces and insights from postmodernistic hyperreality and tourism to examine how the "completely real" becomes identified with the "completely fake" in the staging, consumption and negotiation of experiences with World Heritage and their utility in the management of World Heritage tourism sites.

Keywords Hyperreality, Imaginative geographies, Themed spaces, Popular culture, World heritage, Macao

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

From shopping malls to purpose-built cultural attractions, themed spaces play an important role in displaying and projecting culture (Dicks, 2003; Erb and Ong, 2018; Lukas, 2007; Luo, 2021). Popular culture has also featured vividly in themed places (Dicks, 2003; Erb and Ong, 2017). Specifically, Tucker (2002) examined how Goreme's tourism entrepreneurs and residents deploy the popular American cartoon "The Flintstones" in the marketing and development of tourism in the central Turkish village. Branded "Flintstones-land" because of its sublime natural caverns and chimneys, Tucker (2002) argues that Goreme's tourism are practiced in a hypo-reality (or hyperfakality) where Goreme's natural and real geological features are experienced as more fake than fake. Tucker's hypo-reality is her conceptual reply to Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard's "hyperreality". According to Eco (1990) and

Baudrillard (2007), something fake becomes hyper-real when it becomes more real than real. Various stagings at historic towns have also made edutainment and site aesthetics key concerns for site-managers (Luo, 2021).

This conceptual paper builds on the abovementioned theming literature and an emergent corpus of work in the examination of aesthetics and edutainment at cultural sites (Ning and Chang, 2021; Luo, 2021) to call for greater attention on visitor engagement in World Heritage visitor management and interpretation. Whilst existing work have focussed on site aesthetics and cultural presentation (Ning and Chang, Ong and Jin, 2017; Luo, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2021), this paper critiques the lack of visitor engagement in many culture-based World Heritage sites in East Asia (Khairi *et al.*, 2021). Much current research into visitor management examines the notions of visitor "flows" (Falk and Hagsten, 2021; Khairi *et al.*, 2021) and congestion issues (du Cros and Kong, 2020; Yotsumoto and Vafadari, 2021) but less attention is paid to the ways in which visitor experiences can be channelled towards an appreciation and understanding of the heritage values of the sites visited (Bryce *et al.*, 2015; Hazen, 2009; McIntosh, 1999). Traditionally, standardised interpretive signboards are placed in the vicinity of monuments and sites. Visitors are expected to read and appreciate the monuments as they were (du Cros and McKercher, 2020). Whilst this is effective and appropriate for niche cultural and heritage tourists with tourism motivations centred on heritage appreciation right from the start, it is often unengaging for the rest of the visitor spectrum (Imon and Ong, 2007). Such an issue is exacerbated by the pre-covid mass tourism and pandemic period rise of domestic tourism in sites in China, for instance. Recent efforts in the use of augmented and virtual realities and gamification at heritage sites have, in part, alleviated some of these problems (Jung *et al.*, 2016).

Theoretically, this paper builds on and operationalises Ong's (2017) concept of "cuteification" of cultures, nature and heritage to identify a form of "cuteified heritage" – a pseudo-culture which occurs away from the real heritage sites, but which communicates the heritage values of those sites. This draws on concepts of cultural geography on themed spaces and insights from postmodernistic interpretations of hyperreality and tourism to examine how the "completely real" becomes identified with the "completely fake" in the staging, consumption and negotiation of experiences with World Heritage and a postcolonial city's past. Drawing on observations in World Heritage city of Macao, I situate "cuteified heritage" as one of the four forms of tourism at heritage places along dimensions of "cuteification" and "heritage values" (Figure 1). I term such a classification the "Cuteification-Values Nexus" – a zone of varied engagements between popular culture elements and formal heritage values of a heritage place.
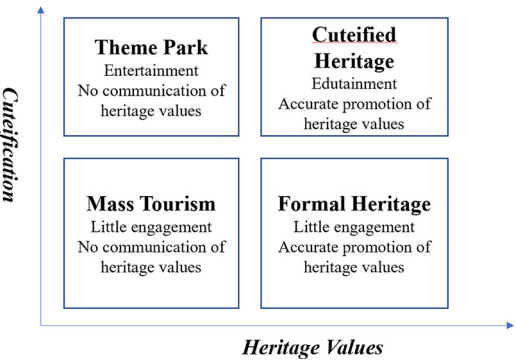

Figure 1.
Cuteification-Value Nexus

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section, I review existing literature relating to the display of cultures, theming and hyperreality. Next, I consider how Ong's (2017) idea of cuteification can be operationalised for understanding and managing World Heritage sites and put forth my conceptual model of Cuteification-Value Nexus. I briefly discuss how each of the zones in the Cuteification-Value Nexus materialises and devote the last discussion section to a detailed examination of the last zone – the cutefied heritage zone. I conclude the paper with a summation of key points discussed and an illumination of the broader implications of such a model and nexus for World Heritage management and for tourism thinking and critiques.

Displaying cultures and theming spaces in hyperreality: from traditional rituals to hello kitty

Previous studies have asserted that visitors to cultural heritage attractions are motivated by and are in search of idealised images of the past (Lowenthal, 1985; McKercher and du Cros, 2002; Sizer, 1999). Tourism has also been said to be about the search of "authenticity" in other times and other places away from one's everyday life (MacCannell, 1973; MacCannell, 2001b). In these cases, authenticity-seeking tourists are ultimately disappointed with the ways in which "real" cultures are commodified and "fake" cultural objects, rituals and performances taking the place of the "real" (Cohen, 1988). Afterwards, works have considered various conceptualisations of authenticity, including how postmodernist interpretations are possible (Wang, 1999). Whilst studies built on the Foucauldian framework are able to attend to the ways in which discourse and power operate (Crang, 1997; Law et al., 2007; Ong and du Cros, 2012; Ong et al., 2014; Urry, 1990) in cultural spaces, they are often limited in their ability to analyse and account for the ways in which the "fake" and the "real" coexist (Tucker, 2003; Winter, 2007; Winter et al., 2008).

Early anthropological works on authenticity and cultural reproduction (Bruner, 1989; Bruner, 1994; Cohen, 1988), Dicks (2003) and Lukas (2007) have provided accounts of how culture operates in themed spaces. Using a range of cases from expositions to theme parks, Dicks (2003) examines the ways in which culture and heritage are projected and presented to visitors through the process of theming. This is done to allow for the places to become more "legible" and "visitable" (Dicks, 2003). These studies revealed that visitors do not always see theming as an endeavour at creating the authentic. Instead, visitors often accept simulations so long they know these are based on partial-truths and that the simulations enrich their experiences. In Lukas' (2007) edited volume, contributors explored theming as a spatial and an imaginative practice from the Yuanmingyuan in China (Ren, 2007) to the Lost City in South Africa (van Eeden, 2007). Like Tucker's (2002, 2003) work on Goreme, these themed spaces and cultures on display often unite authentic materials with not so authentic ones in the creation of compelling and intriguing experiences. For instance, Hardie's (2007) investigations of the Dollywood theme park in Pigeon Forge Tennessee suggests that the authentic feel of its theme park is not merely the result of authentic material setup. Citing hyperreal projects such as the Burj Al Arab and The Palm Islands, Steiner (2010) even boldly proclaims hyperreality as a model of future tourism development in the Middle East and North African countries. Much of these resonates with the postmodern perspectives of Eco (1990) and Baudrillard (2007). In particular, Eco (1990) and Baudrillard (2007) write about the hyperreal. In their conceptualisations, something becomes hyperreal when it becomes more real than real even though it is fake. Eco (1990) posits that the American society desires the real thing. However, to attain authenticity, the American society must paradoxically produce the absolute fake and "where 'the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred" (Eco, 1990, p. 8).

Sanrio's Hello Kitty products have been a commercial and cultural phenomenon. It is particularly successful in linking the individual with varying modes of self-presentation (McVeigh, 2000). In Japan and any parts of the world in which Sanrio lay claims to market, McVeigh has maintained that Hello Kitty is synonymous to girlhood ("cute"), adolescence ("cool") and womanhood ("camp"). Created by Sanrio, a Tokyo-based company founded in 1960 by Tsuji Shintaro, Hello Kitty is a sub-urban London-based cat with a white marshmallow head, small eyes and an expressionless face devoid of any noticeable signs of a mouth. Born on 1st November 1974 and still weighing "3 apples", Hello Kitty introduces herself on her cyber-town (www.sanriotown.com) as a warm cheerful girl who bakes good cookies. She likes to collect all things cute and small, and her favourite food is a slice of her mum's homemade apple pie. Kitty-chan ("chan" is Japanese for diminutive) has a non-identical twin sister Mimmy and identical looking (barring the blue shirt and lack of ribbons and a crew cut hairstyle) boyfriend Dear Daniel (who "toured" Macao with her in the abovementioned event). Hello Kitty is the bestselling and best-known icon of Sanrio and helped contribute significantly to the company's high of 150-bn-yen profit in 1999 and 55-bn-yen profit in 2020 despite the company's recent struggles (Sakura and Hara, 2020). Her appeal is not confined to Japanese women. Her Feline-ness has had a following worldwide and her website at Sanriotown showcases the support she gets from young and upcoming Hollywood actresses and celebrities such as Nicky Hilton and Cameron Diaz.

The Cuteification-Value Nexus: operationalising cuteification for World Heritage visitor management

Ong's (2017) conceptualisation of "cuteification" is useful for our reflections and critiques here. Writing about an animal-based theme and amusement park in Southern China, Ong (2017) examined how a specific form of aestheticisation and commodification of nature are happening in theme parks. In particular, Ong first argues that dangerous wildlife has been "de-fanged" and "de-clawed" in narratives of the theme park to appear safe for close encounters with the silencing of their potentially aggressive tendencies and, for many species, their carnivorous nature. Secondly, Ong discusses how these species (belugas, walruses, seals and dolphins) are personified with visitor-pleasing traits and given human names. Whilst Ong's use of cuteification was aimed at providing a critique to the theme park industry, I argue here that the concept can be usefully adapted for bridging "serious" messages (including the heritage significances and conservation messages) of World Heritage sites and their broader spectrum of non-specialist non-cultural tourist' visitors. Specifically, popular culture motifs can be used to attract and engage visitors who would typically not identify with the more formal and technical messages of heritage significance and conservation. This can be done through the two steps identified in Ong's (2017) work – aestheticisation and personification. Aestheticised and cute reconstructions of the World Heritage site can be used, off the actual site and its core zone, to attract, orientate and solicit visitor buy-ins into appreciating and conserving the heritage of the place they are about to visit. Such sanitisation should remove details relating to but not paramount to the site, thereby making the place more legible. The heritage significances or Outstanding Universal Values of the sites should be retained in interpretive and the ways the reconstructed and cuteified site are presented. The heritage values are still to be kept in hyperreality.

The Cuteification-Value Nexus operates along the following two axes: cuteification and heritage values. It classifies sites or events along the extent to which they engage popular culture in their site or event presentation and the extent to which they accurately communicate heritage values. On the lowest end of both cuteification and heritage values dimensions is "mass tourism". Here, there is little use of popular culture and there is little or

no accurate communication of heritage values. An example of this would be the St Paul's Ruins site in the Historic Centre of Macao. Although a site of immense cultural heritage significance, most tourists to this site leave without truly acquitting themselves or appreciating any of the Outstanding Universal values of the site. Most would have only a brief and superficial experience on-site consisting of quick glances and some photo-taking. Higher on cuteification but retaining a lack of accurate heritage values communication is "theme park". This is a site that uses popular culture and provides for entertainment but does little to promote proper understandings of the heritage of a place. An example of this is the Fishermen's Wharf of Macao. Although it stands close to the Historic Centre of Macao, it is basically a theme park that recycles cultural motifs from around the world – Lisbon to Tibet, for easy entertainment for visitors and to promote consumption. "Formal heritage" is one where the communication of heritage values is high and accurate but where little is done to reach out to the masses through popular culture or edutainment. An example of this is the Guia Lighthouse of Macao. A key part of Macao's World Heritage, the lighthouse is a photogenic attraction with deep heritage significance. Guided tours and interpretive panels speak of its values but more arguably can be done to leverage on its aesthetics to appeal to and communicate its values more broadly. "Cuteified heritage" peaks for both cutefication and heritage values and is one where there is a strong alignment between the promotion of accurate heritage values and doing it in ways which are accessible and appealing for a broad spectrum of visitors. An example of this is the Hello Kitty-themed World Heritage exhibition which happened in Macao in 2006. I will present this cuteified heritage in the next section.

Contextualising Macao and Macao world heritage
Macao lies on the west side of the Pearl River estuary on a peninsula of the Chinese district of Foshan in the Guangdong province. More than 90% of Macao's population are Chinese and Macao reached the height of its significance as a centre of Portuguese trade in 1,600 (Breitung, 2009). Much of this Portuguese influence is reflected in the Historic Centre of Macao. This cluster of the historically significant building consisting of a belt of historic buildings, squares, fortresses and lighthouse embodies one of the earliest and longest lasting encounters between the East and West (Ong and du Cros, 2012a, 2012b). At the 29th Session of the World Heritage Committee in July 2005, The Historic Centre of Macao was approved to be inscribed on United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO's) World Heritage List – making the historic city the 31st World Heritage Site in China. The Historic Centre of Macao is seen by the Macao tourism promotional agency, The Macao Government Tourism Organisation (MGTO), as both an "invaluable cultural heritage" and a "crucial asset of our tourism industry" (Antunes, 2006, February 18). To reinforce Macao's appeal as a cultural tourism destination, the MGTO has also set the year 2006 as "Macao World Heritage Year" (Antunes, 2006) and introduced the Macao Heritage passport, a travel-to-destination-and-chop marketing gimmick. However, the territory has continued to be reliant on the gaming industry and little diversification of its tourism industry in specific and its economy, in general, has been realised (Breitung, 2009; Cheng, 2007; Ong, 2011). In the next section, I illustrate cuteified heritage using the case of a Hello Kitty-themed World Heritage event in Macao Tower.

Cuteified heritage: the past is a feline city
The gaming and historic city of Macao received a new young Japanese "visitor" in 2006. During her 4-month visit, the cute cat and youth culture celebrity, Hello Kitty and her line of Hello Kitty-Sanrio merchandises, arrived in the sparkling new and hyper-modern tourism tower of what used to be the earliest and most-enduring Portuguese colony in the "Far East".

Attending the "I Love Macao!: Explore The Mini Historic Centre of Macao with Hello Kitty", a mini-exhibition on Macao's World Heritage Sites jointly organised by Macao Tower and the Japanese Sanrio Corporation, the Japanese lady cat was graphically introduced into the recreated settings of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed historic sites of Macao (Figure 2) and "touring" the key World Heritage attractions of the territory. This mini exhibition took place at the Macao Tower Convention and Entertainment Centre, a modern tourism tower and convention space built in 2001. In the atrium of this modern tourist tower, intended for a mainly Chinese-speaking audience from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao, Sanrio and its Macao collaborator introduced what was termed a "fun way of peering into the fascinating past" (Macao Government Tourist Office, 18 February 2006). This entailed the recreation and Hello Kitty theming of 16 representative sites from the newly UNESCO World Heritage inscribed Historic Centre of Macao (Figure 3).

Figure 2.
Sanrio-scaped Macao
World Heritage

Figure 3.
Hello Kitty-fied Guia
lighthouse versus the
actual one

Like Eco's (1990) analysis of the replica of the Oval Office, this Hello-Kitty-fied space is expressive of a total fake offered as a real presence. This campaign came with a re-creation of a mini-Macao historic centre complete with interpretive signboards in the air-conditioned comforts of Macao tower. These recreated sites were not only supposed to reference the real but also they were made smaller, cuter and more colourful using Hello Kitty motifs and other Sanrio hallmarks. Lively Hello Kitty interpretive signboards were placed alongside each icon of the Macao Historic Centre to help "heritage visitors" learn about Macao's colonial past. These signboards detailed and referenced the histories of these monuments and historic buildings. Photographs of the actual and real site were also added to help visitors compare the real from the historic sites in Hello Kitty's world. As such, the Hello Kitty-fied space was not to be a mere duplication of reality. The space was made to surpass reality – marrying the surreal and the real. Although there was no customised Hello Kitty mascot walking the grounds and interacting with or posing with visitors (they only appear at the designated workshops), the event was designed to be a fantasy journey into an idealised Macao World Heritage past "guided" by hyper-cute cultural heritage guides Hello Kitty and Cinnamoroll (another Sanrio character) through a series of narratives and decorations in the free-access areas of the exhibition as follows:

> Enter the realm of history with Hello Kitty and Cinnamoroll with a journey through the mini–Historic Centre of Macao. Recently inscribed under UNESCO World Heritage, the collection of architectural masterpieces from the colonial period is a treasure of East-West cultural pluralism bearing witness to the unique history of the city. Start the adventure from mini-Macao Tower and venture through 16 miniature heritage sites, specially designed to retain their original features and cleverly fused with Hello Kitty insignias– the perfect backdrop for the best Christmas photos! (Macao Tower, 2005, December 12).

In this way, an iconic fictional cat became identified with actual UNESCO-endorsed World Heritage. The process of aligning the "original features" of the actual Macao World Heritage attractions was a step towards establishing the miniaturised heritage sites as a substitute for reality, a site for Christmas photo taking. Yet, like Eco's (1990, 10) discussion of the diorama in the Museum of the City of New York, these miniaturised and Hello Kittty-fied heritage sites were to be experienced as hyperrealities that were not only capable of merely serving the photo-taking visitors but also functioned as "perfect backdrops" for some visitors.

This creation of hyperrealities was also augmented by the flanking of some textual narratives and this Hello-Kitty themed fantasy cultural heritage tour of Macao World Heritage necessitated special interpretative technologies and practices, including a Hello Kitty Passport, "travels" within the Hello Kitty spaces and heritage knowledge quizzes as follows:

> Parents and kids can collect a Hello Kitty Passport at the start of the journey, follow the map through each of the sites, delve into their history and significance, and together reveal answers to the trivia quiz in the passport. Select the correct answer by stamping the booklet with thematic Hello Kitty emblems (14 designs), and an exclusive souvenir will await participants at the end of the adventure (Eco's, 1990).

Hello Kitty passports made to look like real passports subjected visitors to the practice of stamping the pages of their special passports like real tourists. Visitors also participated in heritage quizzes based on detailed and real cultural and heritage significances of these heritage sites. For an admission fee of MOP30 (approximately US$3.75), visitors could also participate in the "Hello Kitty Studio" where Hello Kitty and other Sanrio characters mingle with visitors at designated times in a separate room in the exhibition. Visitors were encouraged to take photographs with Hello Kitty as memorabilia. There were also workshops where visitors can learn to bake Hello Kitty cookies or learn gift wrapping the

Hello Kitty way. During the period between Christmas and Lunar New Year, specialty shops were also set up to allow visitors to "shop and dine beside heritage" (Eco's, 1990). Special "Hello Kitty explores with you the Mini Historic Centre of Macao" travel packages are available during the time of the event courtesy of Shun Tak Travel and China Travel Services Ltd. The package included return tickets for ferry connections between Hong Kong and Macao, a lunch buffet at Macao Tower, admission to Macao Tower Observation Lounge, local transport, other discounts and a UNESCO World Heritage guided tour.

In addition to the mixing of the possibilities of real and the surreal bringing about a greater immersion of the visitors in the exhibition spaces, the greater interaction that was facilitated here also led to a deeper experience. Postevent interviews with Macao visitors to the event suggest that the studio and the baking and gift-wrapping workshops had been well-received, particularly amongst family-group of tourists and visitors with young children, suggesting the preference for opportunities to co-create experiences in tourism (Richards and Wilson, 2006, p. 1213). Whilst the Hello Kitty setting played a key role in such activities, these activities allowed visitors to engage in hands-on activities and interaction with fellow visitors, thereby enriching the experience. Beyond the designated programmes, visitors commonly engaged in photo-taking and miniature World Heritage site/sight-seeing. A few tourists expressed that they found the interpretative panels placed near the reconstructed miniature Hello Kitty-fied monuments extremely informative (Figure 4).

Maria from Shanghai even goes as far as to suggest these panels were better placed, easier to find and "informative" than the real ones at the Macao Historic Centre:

> I think I find more information here than when I was out there this morning. In some places (of the Macao Historic Centre), I can't find any information at all. When they do have information, it is so crowded that I must squeeze through the tour groups to get there. . .and even that is not worth the trouble for some of these (interpretative panels) are not well-maintained at all.

The quality of the interpretative panels was also aided using Hello Kitty as a cultural heritage guide and Sanrio motifs as "cultural translators". The Sanrio motifs are cultural translators in the broadest sense of the word in that they help integrate foreign (popular culturally shaped) youths into a strange (UNESCO World Heritage endorsed) past. Li, a young independent traveller from Taiwan, revealed that she is not a heritage person to start with:

> I chose to tour Macao because her boyfriend is a cultural tourist. At first, I was quite bored. We kept going to the World Heritage. It is quite boring because we're just seeing old buildings. My boyfriend is a history student, so he already knows lots. He tried to explain some of the places to me, but after so time he got tired. We didn't even go to the casinos. We came here (Macao Tower) because his former classmate who is working in Macao now is hosting us for a dinner in the Chinese restaurant here. I came ALIVE when I saw the Hello Kitty! He knows I am a Kitty fan, so we toured the Kitty-land (Miniature Macao Historic Centre). I learn quite a bit from the information, and he was quite intrigued at how some of these serious architecture can become so cartoon and girly.

Li was not alone in her statements about how they found the Miniature Macao Historic Centre an interesting and re-assuring way to learn about World Heritage. Here, they were not intimidated by academic writing or historic data about the sites. Instead, what they got was popular cultural icons they could identify with (Hello Kitty and Sanrio) and these cartoon characters kept them interested:

> Heritage *should* be romantic. It is not like this out there. Not just Macao but also when we go to Hong Kong and Singapore. I know this is not real – just some plywood and colours – but this is how heritage *should* look like [pointing to mock-up of the Cathedral, Figure 4] (Zoe, mainland Chinese independent tourist) (Figure 5).

Figure 4.
Bilingual (Chinese and English) Sanrio interpretative panel for the Guia Fortress with photographs referencing the mock-ups to the real and actual lighthouse and fortress on Guia Hill

The Kitty-fied World Heritage landscapes also presented an idealised fantasy space quite unlike the ones experienced by Maria and many other tourists at Macao's Historic Centre. In the real Macao Historic centre, visitors experienced discomfort, lack of orientation, congestion and lack of interpretation. Although the Hello Kitty-fied heritage spaces are

Figure 5.
Mainland Chinese
tourist sharing
photographic
opportunities at the
Kitty Cathedral or
what is to them the
most romantic
looking heritage site

replications of the real that Sanrio created, they had helped realise the expectations of tourists of idealised romantic places – something we can rarely find. One tourist revealed that she likes Hello Kitty since she was a little girl and she still enjoys going for Hello Kitty-related events and is still a proud collector of many Hello Kitty plush and collectibles (Figure 6). Her Feline-ness reminds Samantha of the childhood days she has. Associating

Figure 6.
Hello Kitty plush and
associated collectibles

herself with Hello Kitty today is a means of keeping that childhood link, that ability to travel back in time. To her, Hello Kitty is not a cat, cartoon or popular culture but a time and place – sweet childhood.

Visitors know that it was not authenticity that they were getting but they enjoy it, nonetheless. In fact, one can argue that contrary to MacCannell's (1976) claims, they were not seeking authenticity. Some were contented to have a theme park like experience at the mini-historic centre of Macao. Whilst MacCannell would maintain that this was likely the workings of their "second gazes" (2001) in their sustained quest for authenticity, I argue here that, like Tucker's (2002) Flintstone-land tourism in Goreme, the Hello Kitty-based World Heritage simulations were so compelling that they actually motivate travels to the real sites and do not disrupt from experiences of the actual monuments and places:

> Now that I have seen the Hello Kitty ones, I do feel I want to see the real thing. If not, very bimbo, right? (Natalie, Hong Kong tourist)

> Yes, of course I must see the real St. Paul's! (Zhiping, mainland Chinese tourist).

"Post-tourists" Feifer (1985) would have called them, they engage in a series of tourist practices well-aware of the inauthenticity of their actions. One group of mainland Chinese girls pretended to be archaeologists chancing upon their "find of the millennium", bursting out into laughter when the author approaches them. When asked about their little skit and performance, they revealed that they enjoyed the event precisely because it is so cliché. This group of travelling female cousins and extended family members confessed that they did similar skits and role-plays whenever they found themselves in theme parks or "phoney" cultural shows ("to kill time" and "to have fun") when they went on package tours with the elderly members on the family in various parts of China including Hong Kong and Macao. For these visitors then, travels in Hello Kitty-hyperreality allowed for greater immersion and interaction than what generally happened at serious actual heritage places. Of course, as in all forms of governmentality and regulation of individuals, there will be those who would not buy into the kinds of messaging sold. There were those who would prefer to go straight to the heritage sites instead of viewing and touring a cuteified one.

Synthesis: the Cuteification-Value Nexus

In this paper, I proposed a "Cuteification-Value Nexus" for the examination of the communication heritage values through "cute" popular culture elements. I have reflected on observations in Macao to argue for a higher degree of engagement of culture-based World Heritage sites through a combination of popular culture inspired motifs and accurate heritage messages. Cuteified heritage works by miniaturising, cute-difying and commodifying the Outstanding Universal Values and heritage significances of Macao's World Heritage via a e a Japanese popular cultural event. Specifically, I have discussed the ways in which a Hello-Kitty-fied theming reshaped and realised a romantic World Heritage space and the ways in which some tourists and visitors enjoyed and appreciated the experience. In this sense, the theming in a cuteified heritage revealed how expert-endorsed and corporate-backed imaginative geographies, as sets of representations and projections of cultures, were experienced by visitors. It pointed to how pop culture centred imaginings can help in understanding visitor experiences. In miniature Macao Historic Centre, Hello Kitty and Sanrio motifs help subvert the UNESCO expert sanctioned ideals of a heritage place – authentic, academic and serious. Set in the protected, sheltered and comfortable air-conditioned spaces of Macao's premier business, meetings and convention space, visitor

experiences in this Hello Kitty exhibition were found to be practices and travels in Eco (1990) and Baudrillard's (2007) hyperreality as the Hello-Kitty-scapes become more real than real for these visitors.

My illustration of the coming together of the "fake" Hello Kitty-scapes and the actual Macao World Heritage indicated that rather than seeking authenticity as MacCannell (1973, 1976, 2001) suggests, the reality-based simulations help visitors to immerse themselves in a cultural experience. Consequently, I have argued that simulations are integral components of a heritage tourism experience and that "fake" themed spaces may serve as complementary avenues for "real" heritage place. Some visitors at mini-Macao Historic Centre found interpretative materials at the Hello-Kitty-fied mock-ups informative and "better" than the ones out on actual sites. This suggested both the lack of proper cultural heritage guiding services and the quality of interpretative materials and the potential of using what works in the Hello Kitty event in improving the real visitor experience in real Macao World Heritage sites. In addition, many visitors and tourists interviewed expressed that they would want to go see the real heritage site. This could be something some of them would not readily or voluntarily do if they have not experienced the fantasy and idealised Hello Kitty ones. The reason for their change of mind might rest in that through an experience in the theme park-like spaces of the Hello Kitty event, they had been properly orientated, are comfortable and have had their curiosity unlocked. For these visitors, the mini-Macao Historic Centre had served as a pseudo-visitor centre, orientating, co-producing and stimulating the tourists and visitors.

Beyond the theoretical and conceptual connections, this paper suggests that there is a significant societal relevance of purpose-built cultural heritage theme parks as spaces of edutainment – providing entertainment and basic but stimulating heritage interpretation. Rather than view these simulations and themed spaces as disruptions or contamination of the real, such processes and spaces enrich the visitor experience. Popular and educational it may have been, Hello Kitty's miniature Historic Centre of Macao is temporary and short-lived. Although the Hello Kitty-theming have endured in Macao, these had taken on mainly an array of non-heritage and less cultural themes including, for instance, a childhood-based "Secret House of Hello Kitty" and "The Fantastic Journey of Hello Kitty" in 2007 (which were tie ups with a Hello Kitty Musical in the Venetian Casino) and "The Road to Become a Star" in 2010. On the whole, general Hello Kitty merchandising-related events have remained popular in Macao.

The arguments of this paper are based on my commitment to see World Heritage site managers to pay more attention to engaging visitors beyond their narrower segment of heritage focussed cultural tourists. Engaging and keeping mass tourists interested have both the desired outcomes of better visitor conduct and transforming mass tourists into cultural tourists. In view of the rise of domestic tourism in many parts of East Asia and enduring mass tourism in many World Heritage sites before, during and possibly after the pandemic, it is pertinent that site managers leverage on the effects of cuteification. This can come in forms of interpretive centres away from the core zone of World Heritage sites and in virtual cyber platforms or travelling exhibitions in shopping malls and public libraries. The adoption of cuteification techniques and technologies, however, should always respect and retain the key messages or the Outstanding Universal Values (or heritage values) of the sites. Further research can be done to subject the Cuteification-Values Nexus to empirical testing and to analyse the workings and implications of cuteified heritage in contemporary contexts.

References

Antunes, J. (2006), "Speech at launch ceremony of 2006 Macao world heritage year", February 18.

Baudrillard, J. (2007), *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of MI Press, MI.

Breitung, W. (2009), "Macao residents as border people", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 38 No. 1, pp. 7-17.

Bruner, E. (1989), "Of cannibals, tourists, and ethnographers cannibal tours", *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 4 No. 4, pp. 438-445.

Bruner, E. (1994), "Abraham Lincoln as authentic reproduction: a critique of postmodernism", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 96 No. 2, pp. 397-415.

Bryce, D., Curran, R., O'Gorman, K. and Taheri, B. (2015), "Visitors' engagement and authenticity: Japanese heritage consumption", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 46, pp. 571-581.

Cheng, I. (2007), "A comparative study of travel behaviour of single and multi-destination travellers from mainland China in Macao", *China Tourism Research*, Vol. 3 No. 4, pp. 449-477.

Cohen, E. (1988), "Authenticity and commoditization in tourism", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 371-386.

Crang, M. (1997), "Picturing practices", *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 21 No. 3, pp. 359-373.

Dicks, B. (2003), *Culture on Display: The Production of Contemporary Visitability*, Open University Press, London.

Du Cros, H. and Kong, W.H. (2020), "Congestion, popular world heritage tourist attractions and tourism stakeholder responses in Macao", *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, Vol. 6 No. 4, pp. 929-951.

du Cros, H. and McKercher, B. (2020), *Cultural Tourism*, Routledge, London.

Eco, U. (1990), *Travels in Hyperreality*, Mariner Books, New York, NY.

Erb, M. and Ong, C.E. (2017), "Theming Asia: culture, nature and heritage in a transforming environment", *Tourism Geographies*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 143-167.

Erb, M. and Ong, C.E. (Eds) (2018), *Theming Asia: Culture, Nature and Heritage in a Transforming Environment*, Routledge, London.

Falk, M.T. and Hagsten, E. (2021), "Visitor flows to world heritage sites in the era of Instagram", *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 29 No. 10, pp. 1547-1564.

Feifer, M. (1985), *Going Places*, MacMillan, London.

Hardie, M. (2007), "Torque: Dollywood, pigeon forge, and authentic feeling in the smoky mountains", " in Lukas, S.A. (Ed.), *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation and Self*, Lexington Books, New York, NY.

Hazen, H. (2009), "Valuing natural heritage: park visitors' values related to world heritage sites in the USA", *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 165-181.

Imon, S.S. and Ong, C.E. (2007), *Cultural Tourism Site Management: A Training Manual for Trainers in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and Institute For Tourism Studies (IFT), Macao SAR, China.

Jung, T., Tom Dieck, M.C., Lee, H. and Chung, N. (2016), "Effects of virtual reality and augmented reality on visitor experiences in museum", in Inversini, A. and Schegg, R. (Eds) *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2016*, Springer, Cham.

Khairi, M.N.D., Ismail, H.N. and Jaafar, S.M.R. (2021), "Knowledge of tourist spatial behaviour to improve Melaka world heritage site management", *International Journal of Tourism Cities*.

Law, L., Bunnell, T. and Ong, C.E. (2007), "The beach, the gaze and film tourism", *Tourist Studies*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 141-164.

Lowenthal, D. (1985), *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Lukas, S. (2007), *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation and Self*, Lexington Books, New York, NY.

Luo, Y. (2021), "Safeguarding intangible heritage through edutainment in China's creative urban environments", *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 170-185.

Macao Tower (2005), Press Release 'Hello Kitty Love Macao'. 12 December.

MacCannell, D. (1973), "Staged authenticity", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 79 No. 3, pp. 589-603.

MacCannell, D. (1976), *The Tourist*, Schocken, New York, NY.

MacCannell, D. (2001), "Tourist agency", *Tourist Studies*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 23-37.

McIntosh, A.J. (1999), "Into the tourist's mind: understanding the value of the heritage experience", *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 41-64.

McKercher, B. and Du Cros, H. (2002), *Cultural Tourism*, The Haworth Hospitality Press, London.

McVeigh, B. (2000), "How hello kitty commodifies the cute, cool and camp", *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 225-245.

Ning, Y. and Chang, T.C. (2021), "Production and consumption of gentrification aesthetics in Shanghai's M50", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, doi: 10.1111/tran.12482.

Ong, C.E. (2011), "Hidden injuries of class and bourgeoisie dreams: Casino workers, traditional shipbuilders and boutique hotels in Macao", *Hospitality and Society*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 173-188.

Ong, C.E. (2017), "Cuteifying' spaces and staging marine animals for Chinese Middle-class consumption", *Tourism Geographies*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 188-207.

Ong, C.E. and Du Cros, H. (2012a), "The Post-Mao gazes: Chinese backpackers in Macao", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 735-754.

Ong, C.E. and Du Cros, H. (2012b), "Projecting postcolonial conditions at Shanghai expo 2010, China: floppy ears, lofty dreams and Macao's immutable mobiles", *Urban Studies*, Vol. 49 No. 13, pp. 2937-2953.

Ong, C.E. and Jin, G. (2017), "Simulacra and simulation: double simulation at a North song dynasty theme park", *Tourism Geographies*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 227-243.

Ong, C.E., Ryan, C. and McIntosh, A. (2014), "Power-Knowledge and Tour-Guiding: capitalistic domination, utopian visions and the creation of UNESCO's Homo-Turismos in Macao", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 48, pp. 221-234.

Ren, H. (2007), "The landscape of power: imagineering consumer behaviour at China's theme parks", in Lukas, S.A. (Ed.), *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation and Self*, Lexington Books: New York, NY.

Richards, G. and Wilson, J. (2006), "Developing creativity in tourist experiences", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 27 No. 6, pp. 1209-1223.

Sakura, Y. and Hara, Y. (2020), "Sanrio's 31-year-old CEO looks beyond hello kitty", Nikkei Asia, September 26, 2020, available at: https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Companies/Sanrio-s-31-year-old-CEO-looks-beyond-Hello-Kitty (accessed 18 August 2021)

Sizer, S. (1999), "The ethical challenges of managing pilgrimages to the holy land", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 11 Nos 2/3, pp. 85-90.

Steiner, C. (2010), "From heritage to hyper-reality? Tourism destination development in the Middle east between Petra and the palm", *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, Vol. 8 No. 4, pp. 240-253.

Tucker, H. (2002), "Welcome to Flintstones-Land: Contesting place and identity in goreme, Central Turkey", in Coleman, S. and Crang, M. (Eds), *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*, Berghahn Books, Oxford.

Tucker, H. (2003), *Living with Tourism: Negotiating Identities in a Turkish Village*, Routledge, London.

Urry, J. (1990), *The Tourist Gaze*, Sage, London.

van Eeden, J. (2007), "Theming mythical Africa at the lost city", in Lukas, S.A. (Eds), *The Themed Space: Location, Culture and Self*, Lexington Books, New York, NY.

Wang, N. (1999), "Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 349-370.

Winter, T. (2007), "Rethinking tourism in contemporary Asia", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 899-922.

Winter, T., Teo, P. and Chang, T.C. (2008), "Introduction: rethinking tourism in Asia", in Winter, T., Teo, P. and Chang, T.C. (Eds), *Asia on Tour*, Routledge, London.

Yang, X., Xu, H. and Ni, S. (2021), "The creative renewal of a craft cluster: the role of materiality and mobility in cluster evolution", *Regional Studies*, Vol. 55 No. 3, pp. 546-555.

Yotsumoto, Y. and Vafadari, K. (2021), "Comparing cultural world heritage sites and globally important agricultural heritage systems and their potential for tourism", *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 43-61.

Further reading

Gregory, D. (1995), "Imaginative geographies", *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 447-485.

Said, E. (1978), *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Routledge, London.

tom Dieck, M.C. and Jung, T. (2018), "A theoretical model of mobile augmented reality acceptance in urban heritage tourism", *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 154-174.

About the author

Chin Ee Ong is a Tourism and Cultural Geographer with keen interests in outbound Chinese Tourism, theme park development in Asia, dark tourism and carceral geographies of refugee camps in Europe and Asia. Based in Sun Yat-Sen University's School of Tourism Management since 2019, Chin Ee is currently seeking to develop studies in gastronomic and heritage tourism in China's Greater Bay Area. Chin Ee is the co-founder of the Heritage Tourism and Education Special Interest Group in the Association of Leisure and Tourism Education and is the Controversies and Discussions Editor for social science-based *Hospitality and Society* and am on the advisory board for a reflective and critical boutique journal, Tourism Critiques and the Editorial Board of *Journal of Heritage Tourism and Editorial Review Board of International Journal of Tourism Cities*. Chin Ee Ong can be contacted at: ongchinee@mail.sysu.edu.cn