

The authentic experiences of tourists in Chinese traditional villages based on constructivism: a case study of Chengkan village

Chao Yuan

Department of Tourism Management, Xiangtan University, Xiangtan, China

Xiang Kong

Department of Human Geography, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China, and

Pinyu Chen

Department of Tourism Management, Soochow University, Suzhou, China

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the role of authenticity in tourists' destination selection, analyze the factors that influence tourists to form their initial opinions and explore how tourists construct the authenticity of traditional villages. The authors selected Chengkan village in Huizhou district, Huangshan city, as a case. In the study, the authors constructed an attribute-hardware-software research framework and analyzed tourists' authentic emic experiences from the perspective of constructivism. The findings of this study suggest that tourists' destination selection is influenced by authenticity. The destination culture brokers who interact with tourists play an essential role in forming authentic experiences. According to differences in how tourists construct authenticity, the study divided tourists into three types: primitive imagination, aesthetic reality and rational cognition. The results of this study provide a deeper understanding of various viewpoints about authenticity research and contribute to the academic discussion on how to understand the authenticity of unique cultural heritage sites such as traditional villages in the context of tourism development.

Keywords Authenticity, Tourism experience, Constructivism, Traditional villages, Chengkan village

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Rural tourism emerged in China in the 1990s and entered a period of comprehensive development in the 21st century. According to location conditions, rural tourism includes four types: suburban areas, scenic peripheries, characteristic villages and characteristic agricultural bases (Guo and Han, 2010). Traditional villages with unique characteristics have become an important carrier in the rapid development of rural tourism due to their long history, rich cultural heritage and material remains. They respond to societal needs for preserving nostalgia, seeking roots and appreciating rural aesthetics.

Against this background, the issue of authenticity in traditional village tourism has started to receive attention from the academic community. The authenticity of heritage and tourists' value preference (Xu, 2008) have become the main entry point for discussing the authenticity of traditional villages. On the one hand, authenticity is the fundamental requirement for protecting traditional villages, and many studies have explored the current status evaluation and conservation strategies of the authenticity of traditional villages (Xiao, 2016). However, these studies have focused more on technical operation and practical authenticity protection, with relatively insufficient theoretical exploration (Xu, 2005). On the other hand, few studies have explored categorizing tourists' perception of the authenticity of traditional villages, the construction of indicators and relations between authenticity and concepts such as satisfaction and loyalty (Dai, 2012; Feng and Sha, 2007; Xu and Li, 2012). However, existing research often adopts prior structural surveys from an object perspective, emphasizing a fixed and stable concept of authenticity while neglecting the visibility of the subjects (Tuan, 1998) and the complexity of traditional village tourism scenarios (Li, 2013). In particular, the black box of how traditional villages possess authenticity has not been fully revealed, and the authenticity of villages remains at the level of popular myths (Frisvoll, 2013). Therefore, from the perspective of tourism experience, this paper attempts to discuss how tourists construct authenticity in traditional village tourism to deepen the understanding and recognition of the authenticity of such special cultural heritage as traditional villages (Feng, 2013).

The study took Chengkan village in Huizhou district, Huangshan city, Anhui province, as a case. Based on the data collection and analysis of three field surveys conducted in 2019–2020, we constructed an attributes-hardware-software research framework from the perspective of constructivism. Under this framework, this paper first explores the role of authenticity in tourists' destination selection, then analyzes what factors contribute to the formation of authentic experiences for tourists, and finally reflects on how tourists construct the authenticity of traditional villages during the encoding process. Unlike previous studies on the authenticity of traditional villages, this paper regard authenticity as a subjective concept, which is a representation of the interaction between tourist practice and the tourism space. At the same time, qualitative research methods are used to analyze the complexity of authentic experiences, which effectively supplements previous studies that relied on structured questionnaires. The study is intended to echo the local reflection on the conceptualization of authenticity (Li, 2020) and attempt to address the various debates on authentic experiences in tourism research (Rickly, 2022; Zhao and Dong, 2012; Zhao and Li, 2012), as well as the contentious viewpoints regarding whether rural culture should be preserved in its original form or innovatively used (Huang and Huang, 2018).

Literature review

Origin, concept and debates of authenticity

Authenticity has been widely discussed in tourism research, geography and cultural heritage. From the perspective of the development sequence, authenticity is a cultural construct in the modern Western world (Handler, 1986). The academic interest in authenticity can be traced back to the transformation of social thinking in modern Europe in the 17th century. At that time, due

to the Renaissance and the development of science, the spiritual world of human beings was no longer monopolized by religion, and metaphysical thinking mode emerged. In this sense, people's thinking mode has shifted from a God perspective to an individual perspective, with individuals considering themselves as the ultimate meaning and center of reality (Guo, 1999), laying the foundation for the academic to explore authenticity. Authenticity has become the discourse concern of various disciplines because it reflects modern people's anxiety about reality and existence, and points to the crux and problems of contemporary society.

The exploration of authenticity by MacCannell (1973), a pioneer in tourism research, originated from the nonauthenticity of modern society. The increasing urbanization and industrialization have led to a modern society filled with a commercial atmosphere and false environment detached from the place (Delyser, 1999). In the context of the increasing prominence of nonauthentic conditions, tourists are no longer satisfied with superficial sightseeing activities and mass tourism exploration but seek authentic experiences in tourism destinations (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). In modern life, people are increasingly alienated and dominated by instrumental rationality (Zhu, 2012), and tourists, as secular pilgrims, pursue authenticity to resist the prison of modernity. Therefore, authenticity is considered an important driving force for tourists to travel to places with other historical periods and cultures for consumption and experience (MacCannell, 2008), and it helps explain the necessary value of tourism in modern society (Chen and Weng, 2018).

Generally speaking, the connotation of authenticity in tourism research includes two aspects: one is the description of the tangible quality of something (such as artifacts, food, festivals and buildings) that is considered to be related to traditional production methods or cultural accumulation; the other is the overall intangible perception of the destination's society, culture, travel form or tourism experience (Ma, 2007; Richard, 2018). However, due to cultural and psychological differences between the East and the West, Western tourists pay more attention to the authenticity of the original. In contrast, Eastern tourists focus more on the authenticity of art. The former is based on objective historical facts or historical contexts, emphasizing fidelity to facts. It is an ethical norm based on a cognitive model, while the latter pays more attention to artistic conception and is an aesthetic model based on aesthetic imagination (Wang, 2014). Due to the complexity of the connotation of authenticity, after being transformed and conceptualized its meaning by different scholars, there are many debates on authenticity.

As Hughes (1995) said, the issue of authenticity runs through tourism research like "obligation." It has been studied in tourism research for more than 40 years, and scholars have promoted the theoretical construction and case studies of authenticity in the process of reflecting on research paradigms (De Andrade-Matos *et al.*, 2022; Wang, 1999) and reviewing the dynamics of progress (Rickly, 2022; Zhao and Dong, 2012; Zhao and Li, 2012). At the same time, there are also many debates and cognitive tensions. Typically, for example, at the theoretical level, there are debates between abandoning (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006) and adhering to the concept of authenticity (Belhassen and Caton, 2006; Mkono, 2012), the superiority of the explanatory power of the existentialism authenticity (Wang, 1999) and the necessity of objectivism authenticity in heritage research (Chhabra, 2012, 2019); at the empirical level, there are some following views, such as the dominance of authenticity production (Chhabra, 2005) and the initiative of consuming authenticity (Delyser, 1999; Littrell *et al.*, 1993), authenticity plays a vital role in tourism consumption experience (Castéran and Roederer, 2013; Jiang *et al.*, 2017), or tourists do not value authenticity (Xie and Wall, 2002), and authenticity is only valued by professional/intellectual tourists (Cohen, 1988). There are many types of tourists (May, 1996). Further case studies are needed to respond to these debates so as to deepen the understanding of authenticity.

Research related to the authentic experiences of tourists in traditional villages

The traditional village is renamed from “ancient village,” a unique term in China, and there is no equivalent term abroad (Qiu and Ma, 2016). However, from the perspective of tourist attractions, traditional villages can be equated to heritage villages in international tourism and heritage research (Xu *et al.*, 2013). Heritage tourism has a close relationship with the construction, experience and application of authenticity due to its involvement in representing the past and the other (Wang, 1999), making it one of the main research areas for theoretical debates and discussions on authenticity (Chhabra, 2019).

From the research on authenticity perceived by heritage tourists, there are two research orientations: taking authenticity as the key variable or reconceptualizing authenticity (Rickly, 2022). The former often uses quantitative research methods to explore different types of authenticity and the relationships between authenticity and other variables. For example, Yi *et al.* 2018 studied tourists visiting the heritage sites of Kaiping Diaolou in Guangdong and Tulou in Yongding, Fujian, and found that both intrinsic authenticity and perceived authenticity significantly influenced destination loyalty (Yi *et al.*, 2017, 2018). Similarly, studies have found that the cultural motivation of tourists visiting 25 Romanesque heritage sites in the European Union is an essential cause of object authenticity and existential authenticity, which, in turn, affects their loyalty (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). The latter often uses qualitative research methods to explore how tourists understand the connotation of authenticity. Some studies have pointed out that tourists perceive the authenticity of the Gettysburg battlefield heritage site through elements related to objects, facts, locations, characters and situations (Chronis and Hampton, 2008). Similarly, the authentic experiences of tourists in the “ghost town” of Bodie are closely related to the weathered appearance and anti-commercial local atmosphere (Delyser, 1999). In terms of the study of traditional village tourists’ perception of authenticity, more current studies used the former approach, which categorized authenticity into different types and explored its relationship with satisfaction, loyalty and other variables (Dai, 2012; Feng and Sha, 2007; Xu and Li, 2012). However, some studies on the authentic experiences of tourists in traditional villages in a conceptualized way are still lacking.

Research on heritage villages has dramatically enhanced our understanding of the authenticity of traditional villages. However, traditional villages are different from the static historical and cultural heritage emphasized in existing research, and they are rural settlements that continue to serve the local communities’ production and livelihood. Therefore, exploring the authentic experiences of traditional villages in the context of tourism cannot be divorced from the rural authenticity of traditional villages. Jyotsna and Maurya (2019) have found that tourists constructed their authentic experiences through local food, handicrafts, paintings and participating in activities such as hiking, fishing, working with farmers and appreciating natural landscapes in rural areas. Thus, to explore the authentic experiences of tourists in traditional villages, it is necessary to examine the particularity of the context of tourism comprehensively. Existing tourism research has shown that authenticity is a concept that is difficult to define clearly (Chronis and Hampton, 2008). It is necessary to grasp the prominent significance of authenticity in concrete cases to understand authenticity through analyzing specific situations (Bruner, 1994). According to this, based on the complexity of traditional village tourism scenarios, this paper attempts to analyze how tourists form authentic experiences from tourists’ perspectives as subjects to respond to the theoretical discussion on understanding the authenticity of traditional villages.

Research framework

Although there are still debates between different paradigms of authenticity research (De Andrade-Matos *et al.*, 2022; Wang, 1999), from the research trend, research on authenticity

has shifted from an absolutely solidified essentialist concept of authenticity to a partial, constructed and situational concept of authenticity (Gregory *et al.*, 2009), claiming that:

authenticity is not only an inherent and waiting-to-be-discovered condition, but also a term that has different meanings in different contexts, different places, to different people, and even to the same person at different times. (Bruner, 1994)

To echo this trend, this paper analyzed authentic experiences from the perspective of constructivism.

The ontological assumption of constructivism holds that there is no preexisting reality independent of human mental activity and symbolic language (Wang, 1999). Accordingly, the assumption contains diversified and relative epistemology and methodology. Authenticity is the projection of tourists' beliefs, expectations, preferences, stereotypes and consciousness onto the tourist object (Bruner, 1994). This is more from the social level to understand how tourists construct authentic experiences. However, with the rise of relational turn and re-materialization, both human and nonhuman actors are included in the category of constructivism (Matless, 1997). Therefore, the authentic experience of tourists, as explained in this study, is generated by the interaction between different types of human actors and nonhuman actors, such as material and nonmaterial elements. Following this viewpoint, based on constructivism, combined with the conceptual thinking of hardware and software in previous studies of rural authenticity (Frisvoll, 2013), with the authentic experience as the core, this paper constructed a research framework of attribute-hardware-software, which presented a mutually constructive dialectical relationship among the three elements (Figure 1).

This study examined the authentic experience in traditional village tourism by analyzing the different attributes of traditional villages, such as rural settlements, cultural heritage and tourism resources (Li, 2013), and constructing an analysis framework including the hardware and software. From the connotation of the concept, hardware refers to the material and nonmaterial elements that tourists may rely on to form authentic experiences involving vision, handicrafts and actors, such as architecture, animals, landscapes and rural practices. Software refers to cultural lenses and personal involvement (previous experience, evaluation and belief), which are elements beyond the physical characteristics of the hardware.

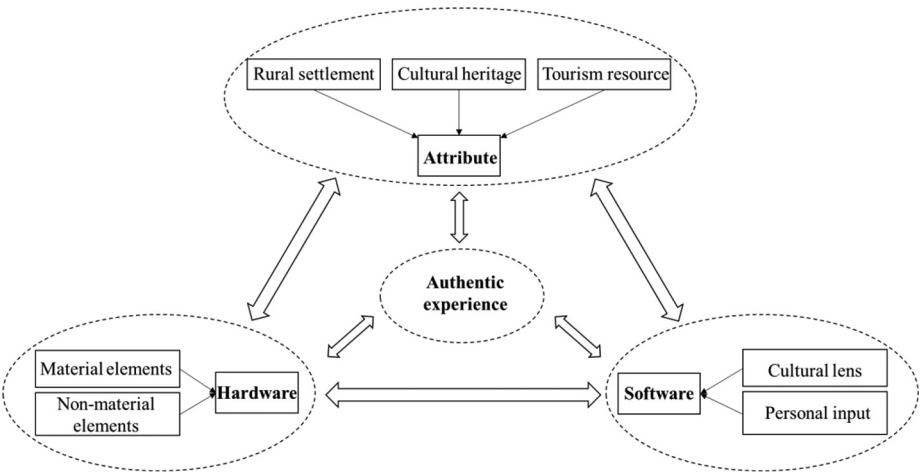


Figure 1.
Research framework

Source: Figure by authors

Research design

Selection of the case site

The study selected Chengkan village in Huizhou district, Huangshan city, Anhui province, as a case study. The area of Chengkan village is 8.24 km², and the permanent population is over 3,460 in 2022, of which approximately 2,619 residents live in the core area of Chengkan ancient village. Currently, most villagers rely on labor and the cultivation of tea and forest to make a living, and some villagers participate in tourism by providing catering and accommodation services. The village has been documented since the late Tang dynasty when the Luo brothers, Wenchang Luo and Qiuyin Luo, moved from Nanchang, Jiangxi, to this area and established the village. By the Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty, the village formed an artificial environmental system of “front river, middle settlement, rear ditch” and built many residential houses and ancestral halls. Currently, 70% of the population in the village still has the surname Luo and relies on ancestral halls, genealogy and ancient houses to inherit clan culture. Chengkan village has a rich historical architectural heritage and complex street patterns. The Dongshu Luo Ancestral Hall and the ancient residential buildings in Chengkan village (20 ancient buildings from the late Ming dynasty to the early Qing dynasty) were listed as national cultural relics protection units in 1996 and 2001, respectively. The unique historical culture and architectural heritage of Chengkan village reflect its typicality as a traditional village and provide resources for tourism development.

A company dominates the tourism development model of the Chengkan scenic area. Chengkan village has become a closed, company-controlled scenic area where indigenous residents still live. In 2002, Huangshan Huizhou Chengkan Bagua Village Tourism Company Limited (hereafter the tourism company) obtained the right to operate by signing contracts with the Huizhou district government and the Chengkan town government. Subsequently, the tourism company partially transformed Chengkan village based on its original landscape and built tourist attractions such as Yongxing Lake and ancient buildings. The tourism company developed the tourism industry by relying on the architectural heritage and local culture of Chengkan village. It focused on creating the tourism image of “Bagua Village” and “A Lifetime without Obstacles in Chengkan Village.” Currently, the main attractions available for visitation include the Dongshu Luo Ancestral Hall, the Yanyi Hall and Yongxing Lake.

Influenced by TV programs such as “Idol Coming” and “Exploring Chengkan Village,” with the upgrading of the level of Chengkan village tourist attraction, Chengkan village has experienced rapid tourism development in recent years. According to the data from the Cultural, Tourism and Sports Bureau of Huizhou District, Huangshan city, the number of ticket sales and total tourism revenue have shown a rapid growth trend from 2014 (568,527 visitors) to 2019 (905,422 visitors). Despite the impact of COVID-19, total tourism revenue in Chengkan village reached 18.809 million yuan, and the number of tickets was 304,756 in 2020. However, different stakeholders have controversies around the connotation of place authenticity during the tourism development of Chengkan village, which is a necessary condition for exploring the research issues of authenticity in the field of tourism (Bruner, 1994), and it is more likely to provide new understanding for authenticity research. In conclusion, considering the heritage characteristics and the tourism development trend of Chengkan village as a traditional village and the relevance of authenticity issues, Chengkan village possesses typicality for exploring the authentic experiences of tourists in traditional villages.

Methodology and research process

This study echoes a shift in the research trend of authenticity, regard authenticity as a partial, constructed and situational concept (Gregory *et al.*, 2009), adopts the perspective of constructivism (Delyser, 1999) and focuses on authentic experience. Qualitative methods are

more suitable for this study, considering the research position and research questions. Specifically, the study mainly used observation and interview methods to collect data through field surveys of Chengkan village from 2019 to 2020. In terms of data analysis, it is mainly carried out through continuous reading and reflection on textual data, following the basic steps of classification, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, iteration and refutation (Spiggle, 1994), and coding with NVivo 12.0. The extraction and naming of genericity in textual coding are completed through continuous comparison, association and reorganization with concepts in existing literature (Miles and Huberman, 2008).

The field investigation is divided into three phases. The first phase is from March 10 to 16, 2019, focusing on the process and status of tourism development of Chengkan village. We investigated the tourism departments of the Huizhou district government and Chengkan town government, the heads of tourism companies and villagers. The author also followed the villagers as a tourist guide to visit Chengkan village and conducted random surveys with other tourists to preliminary understand tourists' perceptions, feelings and attitudes toward Chengkan village. The second phase is from November 20 to 27, 2019. On the basis of a preliminary understanding of tourists' experience, interviews and participatory and nonparticipatory observation were conducted, referring to the research of Chronis and Hampton (2008), Frisvoll (2013) on tourists' travel motivations, consumption content, perception, authenticity perception and evaluation and other aspects. The third phase is from August 29 to September 5, 2020. Based on the text analysis results in the previous two stages, a supplementary field investigation was conducted around the elements of tourists' perception and preferences for understanding authenticity. We interviewed 45 people, including three members from the tourism departments of Huizhou district and Chengkan town, two members of the tourism company and six villagers (Table 1). We coded the tourists as YK(youke), government personnel as ZF(zhengfu), tourism company personnel as LG(localguide) and villagers as CM(cunning), and we numbered them in the order in which they were interviewed. For example, the number of the first tourist interviewed is YK-01, and so on.

Analysis of results

The pursuit of authenticity: why do tourists choose Chengkan village?

In the context of modernity, the pursuit of authenticity is an important motivation for tourists to travel and sightsee elsewhere. The traditional village has become a place of resistance against modern forces due to its historical character and boundary features. With the promotion of modernism, standardization and high-efficiency concepts on a global scale,

Interviewee	Gender	Quantity	Interview location
Tourist	Male	19	Inn, tourist attraction, rest place in scenic spots
	Female	26	
The staff of the tourism bureau of the district government	Female	2	Huizhou district Government
The staff of the tourism office of the town government	Female	1	Chengkan town Government
Person in charge of tourism company	Male	2	Tourism company reception hall
Villager	Male	6	Villager home

Table 1.
Basic information of
the respondents

Source: Table by authors

a state of continuous disorientation and indecision has been fostered (Suntikui, 2018). Under this social background, modern society's desire for authenticity has been stimulated, emphasizing the state of "authentic self" from the subject's perspective (Berger, 1973). According to MacCannell (1973), pursuing this state requires going to places modern forces have not alienated. The rich historical and cultural heritage and diverse social realities of traditional villages contrast sharply with the places of reproduction under the influence of commercialization, Disney-oriented and museumification in the present society. Through investigation and analysis of tourists in Chengkan village, we have found that the unique characteristics of Chengkan village, such as its original features, architectural characteristics and cultural symbols, as well as its level of commercialization, have prompted tourists to choose Chengkan village as a tourist destination.

First, the original features of the village satisfy tourists' desire and exploration needs for authenticity. The falsehood and placelessness surrounding modern life drive tourists to seek the past and historical cultural heritage (Waite, 2000), which is projected onto the selection of traditional village tourist destinations:

He and I (the respondent's husband) like to see primitive villages. We have been to Hongkeng, where there are not many people. Chengkan village is more primitive, so we came to take a look. (YK-02)

These two tourists, as "explorers" of traditional villages, considered the original features of the village as one of the crucial factors in choosing a tourist destination. Related to this:

We came here to take a look. The introduction said that the village has a long history, 1800 years. We only look at the old things, not the new ones. There is something new and modern in Beijing. (YK-06)

In terms of the visitors' requirements for the object of gaze, the original character of the village is also an important attraction for tourists. However, for tourists, the failure to maintain the original architectural landscape and village pattern can cause them to have a pessimistic sense of the place:

We are a casual couple, not those who plan things in advance. We just came out to have fun. This village is artificially aged in the later period. These new cement houses mixed with the old ones give a sense of incompleteness. (YK-35)

Second, the unique architectural features and cultural symbols of Chengkan village are also reasons tourists select it as a destination. Uniqueness is often associated with the past and cannot be replicated. It is closely related to the individual's pursuit of authenticity (Littrell *et al.*, 1993):

I like going to places like Xidi, Hongcun, Chengkan, Nanping, and Tachuan. We have come here three times before, and we have visited all these places. The Huizhou-style architecture still retains its original characteristics. The Huizhou style is also a feature. It would be better to pass it on. (YK-19)

In particular, this architectural character is more pronounced than that of other traditional villages:

We are locals from Huangshan. We have never seen stone pillars like those in Baolunge in other ancient villages in Huangshan. We came here because of its reputation. (YK-30)

In addition, the cultural symbol of Chengkan village is also a factor that influences the choice:

We mainly came because we heard that this is a Bagua village, so we came to look for the characteristics of Bagua. (YK-03)

Bagua village is a cultural symbol created by the tourism company to highlight the local characteristics of Chengkan village among many traditional villages. It enhances the tourism image of Bagua village by associating it with unique and distinctive events. It can be seen that the architectural and cultural uniqueness of the village constitutes an attractive element for tourists to enhance the tourist experience.

Third, the low level of commercialization also constitutes an attractive element of Chengkan village. The commercial atmosphere is filled with people's daily life in modern life. In the intercomparison of tourist places and destinations, tourists pursue anti-commercialization areas. In many heritage sites similar to ghost towns, anti-commercialism constitutes an attractive element of such places (Delyser, 1999). Chengkan village also exhibits similar characteristics. When interviewing tourists on how to know about Chengkan village, the method recommended by local tourism service providers (taxi drivers, innkeepers and local guides) was mentioned by tourists many times. The commercial atmosphere of Chengkan village is not intense, which is why Chengkan village is recommended:

I heard that this place has the longest history and is recommended by many people. Actually, when we came, we didn't make a plan. I asked the taxi driver and the innkeeper, and they recommended this place. The main reason is that it is not commercialized. (YK-04)

It can be seen that cultural brokers such as innkeepers play an important role in tourists' choice of tourist destination. In the era of mass tourism, tourists' tourism experiences have become richer. Under the circumstances that other traditional villages have a relatively more commercial tourism atmosphere, Chengkan village's attractiveness has been further enhanced:

We came out to play, too commercial, we didn't like that, and then we went to Wuzhen, but it was too commercialized. The owner of the inn where we stayed told us that Hongcun was too commercialized, so we came to Chengkan village. (YK-27)

Given the anti-commercialism characteristic of Chengkan village, cultural brokers composed of local tourism service providers (Yu, 2012) can recommend Chengkan village to tourists in the host-guest interaction, thus influencing tourists' travel choice behavior. In conclusion, authenticity plays a vital role in tourists' destination selection, not that authenticity is no longer important, as some literature points out (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006).

The authentic experience of the village: elements of perceiving authenticity

Chengkan village satisfies tourists' tourism motivation of pursuing the authenticity of villages. In their actual sightseeing activities in Chengkan village, including observing, listening, walking and taking photos, tourists get authentic experiences in the process of appreciating the "hardware" composed of heritage landscape, rural image and tourist landscape, and the "software" consisting of local atmosphere and cultural uniqueness (Table 2).

Heritage landscapes are the cultural heritage landscapes that have been preserved in the process of formation and evolution of the village. Heritage landscapes account for 54% (coded 56 times) of the "hardware" coding and include ancient houses, ancestral halls, streets and other concepts. These are the material support of traditional villages as cultural heritage. Together with the cultural uniqueness of heritage landscapes, they shape tourists' authentic experiences:

The buildings here are quite impressive and larger than those in Zhejiang province. The wooden structures in our area are mostly two-story houses, while here they are taller. The ancestral halls are not as tall either. Also, the wooden ones here have three stories, while ours are all two-story houses. (YK-25)

There are many ancient houses in Huangshan city, like Hongcun and Xidi, but I have never seen stone pillars like those in Chengkan village. (YK-30)

Therefore, the cultural uniqueness created by the differences and scarcity of landscapes enhances tourists' authentic experiences and increases their knowledge:

The temple of Dongshu Luo is the largest ancestral hall I have seen in a village, which overturns my previous level of knowledge about villages. (YK-09)

When tourists perceive the mutual production of materiality and uniqueness of heritage landscape, the significance of tourism activities presents itself.

The rural image refers to the images that constitute rural characteristics and is related to the public imagination of the countryside. This is an element of understanding tourists' perception of authenticity from the perspective of traditional villages as general villages. If the village meets tourists' certain imagination and expectations of the countryside, it possesses authenticity (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). Rural imagery includes indigenous people, rice fields, cooking smoke, flowers and plants and local specialties, and is coded 18 times in total, which is in line with tourists' imagination of the village:

Go straight around the river, and there is a bridge in the middle. You can see these buildings, smoke, and so on from a distance. There are fields and flowers next to them. It is good and has the feel of a village in southern Anhui. (YK-11)

These aspects are also reflected in the interviews with Chengkan villagers:

People still live in our village, unlike Hongcun, where everyone has moved out. Some tourists want to see our village as it used to be. (CM-01)

The rural images and local atmosphere of Chengkan village align with tourists' imagination of the countryside and their pursuit of a slow lifestyle. The weak commercial atmosphere is coded 36 times, accounting for 77% of the coding of the local atmosphere, indicating that this is the most significant impression tourists have of Chengkan village. The interviewed tourists associate the low level of commercialization with fewer tourists, less commercialization and the preservation of ancient villages. They also find the sense of place more evident than other ancient villages they have visited:

Hongcun is too commercial, with three bars and a noisy atmosphere. It has completely erased the distinctive architecture and the feeling of a water town. It is a mishmash. Comparing the two, I

Main category	Subcategory	Concept	No. of coding
Hardware	Heritage landscape	Ancient houses, ancestral halls, streets and ancient building components	56
	Rural image	Indigenous people, air, cooking smoke, rice fields, flowers and plants and local speciality	18
	Tourist landscape	Yongxing Lake, the autumn sunbathing event, Pingankan and wood carving crafts	29
Software	Local atmosphere	Weak commercial atmosphere, primitive style, slow life and idle	47
	Cultural uniqueness	Historical culture, unique landscape, symbol image and character contrast	40

Source: Table by authors

Table 2.
Coding of tourism
experience elements

might prefer Chengkan village. Chengkan village is less commercial, and many indigenous people still exist. There are more original elements here, which makes Chengkan village more interesting. (YK-20)

The low level of commercialization further highlights the rural authenticity of Chengkan village, making it suitable for modern tourists to temporarily escape the commercial atmosphere of their daily life and experience a slow-paced life as opposed to a fast-paced urban life. The slow lifestyle reflects the apparent difference between the rural tourism experience in Chengkan village and urban life. In the eyes of tourists, Chengkan village is relatively quiet, the pace of life here is slow and it is suitable for idling and elderly care. It can be regarded as a place for people in the city to relax after busy work:

This is a slow life, more suitable for people from the city. (YK-05)

This village is suitable for idling and elderly care. When you are tired from work, you find a place to relax and idle. (YK-02)

Tourism companies reproduce tourist landscapes to cater to tourists' experiences and consumption. Tourism companies enhance tourists' authentic experiences by creating landscapes and re-narrating history and culture:

The scenery over there by the lake is beautiful. I took many photos there, and there are many villagers nearby. I think this place has the feeling of a village, while Hongcun is just another scenic spot that differs from it. (YK-42)

The Yongxing Lake, imitation ancient buildings and the autumn sunbathing event in the scenic square are the key exhibition projects developed by tourism companies in the tourism development of Chengkan village:

As for the autumn sunbathing event, it is more concentrated and distinctive in that place. We have been to Jixi, but there is no such event there. (YK-09)

As photographers, we like this kind of harvest theme. It's nice to take photos by the lake. (YK-13)

However, tourists have initiative and do not fully accept the landscapes produced by tourism companies to cater to tourists' imagination. Regarding the autumn sunbathing event in Chengkan village, some tourists also said that:

The autumn sunbathing event is not good and is a bit fake. I have been to Wuyuan, and the autumn sunbathing event there looks better than this. (YK-07).

Villagers also expressed:

The autumn sunbathing event here is all fake. Chengkan village has large flat areas, unlike Huangling, where there are fewer flat areas, and those things need to be placed on dustpans. Also, everything in the sun is related to what we eat and feed our pigs, not designed by tourism companies just for looking nice. (CM-4)

In fact, villagers do not recognize the tourist landscape, which affects tourists' authentic experiences during their interaction and communication with tourists. In addition, when tour guides narrate the history and culture of the village, tourists compare their historical knowledge with the explanation, which enhances their perception of the authenticity of the village:

I have been to Xu village; honestly, this place has more culture. Xu village has fewer famous people and less history. Here (referring to Chengkan village), I didn't even expect to be able to

connect it with Song Yan. I didn't even know Yan Song stayed here, and Xiaohua Luo wrote the Chinese character “参” 28 times. These things are interesting only when you encounter them in Chinese history. (YK-37)

As Tuan said, the language narration of a place can change the subject's perception of the place (Tuan, 1991). In fact, the historical Xiaohua Luo mansion is not the Xiawu scenic spot for tourists to visit, and the tourism company placed historical and cultural celebrities in the Xiawu scenic spot, effectively enhancing tourists' experience of visiting scenic sites.

The construction of village authenticity: understanding the types of authenticity

Based on the coding, classification and comparison of interview texts, the study summarized three types of ways for tourists to understand the construction of village authenticity, including primitive imagination, aesthetic reality and rational cognition:

- (1) Primitive imagination: tourists of this type seek villages that satisfy their imagination, and they pursue villages shaped from a cultural perspective and reflecting their psychological needs (Richard, 2018), so that they ignore the actual development of traditional villages, it is full of theoretical imagination (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). In other words, if the village visited by tourists is consistent with the character of the village imagined by tourists, it means that tourists have authentic experiences:

Undeveloped places are great. Once they are developed, they change. There is another ancient village we have been to, and it is no worse than Chengkan village. That village is still undeveloped and has a better ecological environment than Chengkan village. It is better than Chengkan village. (YK-17)

This is to construct authenticity in a static way and a way that “freezes” the past; that is, traditional villages should not be developed or changed but should remain primitive, then traditional villages possess authenticity. This type accounts for 65% of the total number of codes. Specific indicators are used to describe whether traditional villages have authenticity or not, as mentioned in the text:

No commercialization, no access to modern technology, indigenous people.

The underlying logic behind this is the binary opposition between tradition and modernity. In the context of traditional village tourism, tradition means preserving the original, old and historical, while modernity means development, artificiality and commercialization. This type of tourist desires traditional villages to remain in their original state to satisfy their local imagination:

- (2) Aesthetic reality: such tourists tend to put the aesthetic value of ancient village landscapes in the first place and recognize the practical need to restore the village landscapes. They hold a moderate attitude between maintaining the village's original state and renovating it in a modern way. Landscapes can be properly renovated while maintaining a visual aesthetic. As shown in Figure 2:

Why keep these old houses? They are not attractive anyway. The landscape can be properly renovated while maintaining a visual aesthetic. They will be much better if we fix them up a little bit. (YK-06)

Those extremely old and authentic ones are definitely very bad. There is nothing special about them. There may be some new stuff inside, but a sense of history should be maintained. (YK-15)



Figure 2.
“Broken” buildings in
Chengkan village

Notes: The author took the left photo on November 24 2019 at the front street of Chengkan village, and the author took the right photo on November 26 2019 at the back street

Source: Figure by authors

Most of the ancient buildings in Chengkan village are from the Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty, with a history of several 100 years. The main use of wood materials in ancient Chinese structures determines that it is difficult to maintain the original appearance of the surviving ancient structures. If these ancient buildings are not renovated, they will inevitably be damaged, affecting the aesthetic experience. These tourists have the demand for maintaining the original appearance of the landscape, but not in a static way, and they support preserving some elements of the original landscape, such as “the quaint taste, not being too new, and maintaining a certain history.” The combination of original elements and aesthetic experience makes these tourists believe that traditional villages have authenticity. This group accepts that ancient Chinese buildings in traditional villages are a mixture of primitive and modern, and at the same time, these ancient buildings still need to meet tourists’ demand for aesthetics. In this sense, it is a kind of authenticity that originates from the real situation (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006):

- (3) Rational cognition: such tourists believe that culture or society is dynamically evolving, and the origin or tradition in the cultural sense is invented and constructed according to the environment and current needs of the individual (Cohen and Cohen, 2012). For tourists, the landscape will have authenticity with the evolution of time and the change of its functional value:

The front part of the Huanxiu Tower is new, and the back part is old, but after a few years, after 100 years, the old part may become a relic. For example, this house is from the Qing dynasty. It was a new house for people in the Qing dynasty, but now it is a cultural relic. (YK-12)

As Lowenthal (1975) reminded us, old things should look old, but we forget that they were once new. Although most villagers in the field survey believe that Yongxing Lake lacks authenticity, tourists still find it valuable:

We don’t care if it’s newly excavated. Having a lake is better; it is like a fire-fighting pool. In case of a fire, like Hongcun, there is a big “cow” to play the role of fire protection. (YK-19)

It doesn't destroy the environment because having water in the place where you live brings spiritual energy. You know it was excavated in 2002; your great-grandchildren know it was excavated in 2002. Oh, it has a 100-year history and a sense of history. What's the difference? As I said, it gives the thing time value. (YK-12)

It can be seen that the function and meaning of the landscape also constitute the reference for tourists to construct the authenticity of the village. Thus, the third type of tourist understands authenticity from the perspective of time relativity and landscape functionality, which transcends the preference for past time and space of the other two types of tourists mentioned above, including the primitive imagination type and the aesthetic reality type of tourists.

Conclusions and discussion

Conclusions

This study took Chengkan village in Huizhou district, Huangshan city, as a case. From the perspective of constructivism, by analyzing text obtained through interviews and observations during field investigations from 2019 to 2020, the study examined how traditional village tourists form authentic experiences, initially revealed the logical relationship between villages, authenticity and tourist experiences, enriched the research on the authenticity of traditional villages from a subjective perspective and conceptually considered the authenticity of such special cultural heritage as traditional villages.

The authenticity of traditional villages in the context of tourism development is more complicated than that in the context of culture, heritage or rural tourism. Its complexity is manifested in the presentation of tourists' authentic experiences, which emphasizes the material's initiative in cultural and heritage tourism and is closely related to the rurality in rural tourism. The complexity is the result of the interaction of multiple factors. The case study of Chengkan village shows that authenticity still plays a role in tourist destination selection, which is reflected in their pursuit of the villages' original characteristics, anti-commercialization, architectural features and cultural symbols. The interaction between tourists and destination cultural brokers, such as taxi drivers, innkeepers and local guides, plays an important role in this pursuit. This pursuit is reinforced through embodied activities such as observing, listening and speaking, walking and taking photos and an authentic experience is formed through the interactive appreciation of heritage landscape, rural image, tourist landscape and local atmosphere and cultural uniqueness. However, tourists' emphasis on preserving ancient buildings and the low degree of commercialization also reflects their preference for the primitive imagination, that is, understanding the authenticity of traditional villages in a static and frozen-past way. In addition, tourists also understand the authenticity of traditional villages based on aesthetic reality and rational cognition. In keeping with the aesthetic, the former mixes the primitive features of the village with modern elements, while the latter believes that the village's landscape will be endowed with authenticity as it evolves and its functional value changes.

Discussion

Authenticity is one of the hot topics in tourism research. Many debates on authenticity have emerged in the academic field in the past 40 years, and more case studies are needed to further respond to these debates. Additionally, due to the multi-dimensional attributes of traditional villages, the previous research results of authenticity under a single tourism scenario are difficult to explain the authentic experiences in traditional village tourism fully. This study, on the one hand, responded to the debates in the field of authenticity research, and on the other hand, opened the black box of authenticity of traditional villages as special

cultural heritage, deepening the cognition of the social and justice issues in tourism development and conservation of traditional villages.

First, the case of Chengkan village demonstrates that authenticity still plays a role in influencing the preferences of tourists in traditional villages, which responds to the debates on whether tourists value authenticity and the categorization of tourists. In the existing research, there are two viewpoints: “the pursuit of authenticity” and “the enjoyment of fabricated events” by tourists (Cohen, 1988). This kind of black-and-white judgment treats authenticity as an objective fact waiting to be discovered (Wang, 1999), neglecting how tourists as “selves” understand authenticity in specific contexts. Different from Xie and Wall’s (2002) research findings of “tourists have no concept of authenticity” in their research on Hainan folk villages, this study found that the possible reason for the difference in tourists’ perception of authenticity lay in the difference in how tourists visited the villages in the two cases. The interviewed tourists in Chengkan village are all independent travelers who arranged sightseeing activities by themselves, while the interviewees in Xie and Wall’s study are mostly group tourists with relatively limited autonomy in their choices. Furthermore, from the type of tourists, although the interviewed tourists in Chengkan village are mostly mass tourists, they still have the desire to seek authenticity. This finding supports May’s (1996) argument that the tourist group that pursues authenticity far exceeds the group range of specific types of tourists classified by Cohen (1979). Therefore, authenticity remains important in tourists’ cognition and destination choices (Mkono, 2012), and we should further enhance our understanding of tourism phenomena in the process of conceptualizing authenticity (Belhassen and Caton, 2006).

Second, starting with the tourism experience, this paper opened the black box of how traditional villages have authenticity and pointed out that the method of understanding the authenticity of the traditional village tourism field should go beyond the dichotomy of subject and object. As Cohen (1988) has pointed out, it is not whether individuals truly have authentic experiences but rather what makes their experiences authentic from the individual’s perspective. The authentic experiences of tourists in Chengkan village result from the interaction between the multi-dimensional attributes of traditional villages and factors such as individual values, beliefs and experience. It involves emphasizing materiality (such as ancient architecture) in heritage tourism (Chhabra, 2012), as well as the pursuit of rural imagery in rural tourism (Jyotsna and Maurya, 2019). Also, it superimposes the elements of authentic stage performances arranged by tourism producers. In addition, the case of Chengkan village echoes DeLyser’s findings in the “ghost town” of Bodie in the USA, which suggests that factors such as the daily living environment of tourists, tourism experience and the degree of local commercialization also play an active role in shaping authentic experiences (DeLyser, 1999). This goes beyond the destination itself. The experience of authenticity needs to be understood from the dialectical relationship between materiality and spirituality and the mutual construction of subject and object. Therefore, the complexity of the tourism context of traditional villages prompts us to understand authentic experiences in this context from the relationality of authenticity (Rickly, 2022) generated from the interaction of human and nonhuman actors, which should go beyond the previous research paradigm of the subject-object dualism. The relationships between heterogeneous actors effectively integrate the multi-dimensional attributes, hardware, software and other elements of traditional villages, thus deepening the understanding of authentic experiences.

Finally, examining the authenticity of traditional villages from the perspective of constructivism helps to transcend the emphasis on materiality in current conservation practices and to incorporate sociality and justice into village development and protection. This study shows that most tourists hope that traditional villages remain in their original

state, which is consistent with the practice of local governments focusing on preserving the physical appearance. However, in addition to material elements, research has confirmed that rural imagery, including indigenous people, daily life practices of local residents (Wang, 1997) and interaction between tourists and locals can enhance tourists' authentic experiences (Conran, 2006). Therefore, in terms of enhancing the tourist experience and promoting the tourism development of traditional villages, the protection of the rights of indigenous people to live in the village space has also been justified. In this sense, the focus of considering rural cultural preservation and utilization should go beyond the dichotomy of authentic preservation and innovative utilization, and we should pay more attention to who is involved in authentic preservation and for whom, as well as the power relations and effects within it. As Cole (2007) has reminded us, research on authenticity should not only focus on the hot or cold aspects of authenticity or the considerations of objectivity and existence but also pay more attention to issues of how to move from tourists' authentic experiences toward community empowerment and the promotion of fairness and justice. Following this viewpoint, it is necessary to critically understand the dichotomy between foreground and background authenticity, authentic preservation and local development from a relational perspective. Subsequent research can further explore how power relationships between heterogeneous actors affect the construction and reproduction of authenticity to deepen the understanding of the authenticity of the traditional village's tourism field from an emic perspective.

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Corresponding author

Xiang Kong can be contacted at: xkongcg@163.com