Research Note

Revisiting the Chinese calligraphic landscape

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Introduction

The Chinese calligraphic landscape is a symbolic landscape with handwritten or engraved characters of Chinese calligraphy. As a primary national cultural heritage, it is essential to Chinese tourism. In a social context, referring to the institutional context that provides the conditions of existence of the mode of production (Scott & Marshall, 2009), the Chinese calligraphy landscape still regulates both daily and leisure lives of the Chinese people (Yen, 2005). The landscape-as-text theme has been already widely explored in the disciplinary of political science and anthropology (Kraus, 1991; Yen, 2005). Surprisingly, this theme remains missing in the explorations of the Chinese calligraphic landscape in tourism research. Current research adheres to the theory of the traditional cultural geography and perceives landscape as “the distinctive geographic areas which could be identified and described by mapping visible elements of material cultural produced by unitary social group. Such landscapes and regions are identified as the product of stable” (Cosgrove & Jackson, 1987). With the guidance of the tradition cultural geography, most studies of the Chinese calligraphic landscape in tourism settings (Qi, Yang, & Zhang, 2013; Xiao, Zhang, & Lu, 2012; Zhou, Zhang, & Edelheim, 2013) have been reduced to an exploration of static material culture as well as individual psychology and behavior rather than social formation underneath this material culture. Considering calligraphic landscape, ongoing structures behavior of Chinese citizens in various tourism destinations (Xiao et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2013), studying it as social formation can effectively trigger tourists’ motivation, encourage their involvement in some tourism activities, enhance their tourism satisfaction, and strengthen their national identity. This study contributes to the enhancement of local identity among residents. Consequently, this note attempts to revisit the Chinese calligraphic landscape as social formation and reconsider its definition, methods, and findings in recent tourism studies.

Initially, relations between social formation and the Chinese calligraphic landscape were absent in the definition. Zhang (2003) firstly “defined calligraphic landscape as a portion of geographical space with certain visual characteristics and special sense of place resulted from the layout of assemblies of calligraphic works/analogous calligraphic works with a certain scale or visual performance.” Literally, remarks such as “assemble,” “certain scale,” and “visual performance” all indicate the intention of the focus on visual impression rather than social formation in this definition. In reality, this definition virtually excluded more intended hidden calligraphic landscapes or individual calligraphic landscapes. It is more likely that those landscapes will re-emerge as valuable tourism attractions with the settlement of social/political conflicts (i.e. the once buried tablet with the school name of Nanking University uncovered and displayed on the campus of Nanjing University as a main tourism attraction). As a result, it needs to regard calligraphic landscape as a process of creation, alteration, obliteration and rebirth and redefine the concept of the Chinese calligraphic landscape through the perspective of social formation. This definition will define the formation of the methodology, which can excavate dynamic, contested cultural meanings attached to the Chinese calligraphic landscape in tourism settings.

Furthermore, under the influence of the traditional cultural geography, the methodology for previous researches separated otherwise integrated analysis of the creation and consumption of the Chinese calligraphic landscape in tourism settings. Specifically,
it contains several drawbacks. First, current theories such as sense of place (Xiao et al., 2012), perceived value (Li, Huang, & Zhang, 2014) have a limitation of setting up universal measurements to synthesize findings from two strands of studies, which focus on creators and viewers respectively. Secondly, researchers prefer choosing calligraphic environments rather than the specific individual calligraphic landscapes as analysis units. According to one field research by Yen (2005), broader calligraphic environments are unable to contribute to understand the status quo of the Chinese calligraphic landscape since “the importance of calligraphy becomes more localized (Yen, 2005)”. Thirdly, structural equitation model targets the audiences’ experience rather than creators’ experience. It is not suitable for further disclosing spatial–temporal characteristics of activities related to the creators and viewers. Finally, scholars inclined to construct the index of calligraphic landscape from graphic indices (i.e. style) as opposed to linguistic indices (i.e. texts). This kind of index falls short of explaining the complexity of social relation underling the circulation of the Chinese calligraphic landscape.

The weaknesses stemmed from the previous methodology were merely studying the Chinese calligraphy landscape as a discrete entity that is alienated from social or political context. It is necessary to introduce the term Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which could be defined as an interdisciplinary methodology intended to uncover “how societal power relations are established and reinforced through language use (Coulthard, Rosa, & Malcolm, 1996).” Specifically, three-dimensional frameworks are used to analyze communication texts: spoken or written language texts, discourse practice (process of text production, distribution and contribution), and discourse events as instances of socio-cultural practice (Coulthard et al., 1996). CDA can help construct a same yardstick to guide a variety of future researches (i.e. psychological experiment, deep-interview, and survey), and then integrate findings from those studies to convincingly clarify their underlying causes and effects. Conventionally, the Chinese calligraphy could be regarded as a typical data; in other words, texts, which can be used for the discourse analysis, since it is a character in essence. As texts, a singular, self-contained, and complete piece of the Chinese calligraphy includes four subdivisions: body (i.e. character except signature, date, and stamp), signature, date, and stamp with engraved Chinese characters. As these subdivisions are crucial to uncover social formation beneath the Chinese calligraphic landscape, they are to be established as universal measurements and applied in various studies. For example, in the eye movement experiment, participants’ visual attention on Chinese calligraphic landscape in tourism settings can be tracked by recording their fixation locations, durations, numbers and scan paths among four subparts. At the same time, a special spatial database can be created, made up of spatial entities/objects (texts) and attributes (i.e. carrier, style, form, location, and time). This database will choose the relative spatial reference (i.e. control points, lines, and areas with important social meanings) instead of the absolute spatial reference (i.e. geographical, projected coordinate system), because a finding (Shi, Mao, Tang, Jiang, & Gao, 2015) revealed that a trivial change in the location of the symbolic landscape, such as an extension to public space from indoors, reflects in-depth power conflicts.

CDA methodology can shed light on some interesting findings, such as:

(1) How can Chinese calligraphic landscapes contribute to the creation of national, local, social and self-identity in tourism destinations?
(2) How do Chinese calligraphic landscapes construct to promote the restoration of authenticity in devastated or relocated historical districts? How does this reconstruction benefit tourists' perception of existential authenticity in those districts?
(3) How does the social relation engage in the formation of the tourism resource and then influence the perception of the presence of the Chinese calligraphic landscape in the destination characterized with this tourism resource?

In conclusion, this research reveals that it is essential to redefine the study of the Chinese calligraphic landscape in tourism settings through the perspective of social formation. In order to create a broader theory frame for such research, it is vitally important to strengthen dialogue between tourists and social researchers, and thereby enabling the combination of current separate explorations, namely investigation on personal psychology and behavior as well as social formation related to the Chinese calligraphic landscape.

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