Smart Creative Tourism: 
Public Participation through 
Technologies in Chinese Museums

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ABSTRACT

This article will focus on how smart museums provide conditions for creative and playful learning experience that facilitates creative tourism development, overcomes cultural barriers of public participation, and therefore benefits to smart city planning. Theoretically, a social-cultural perspective to the concept of creativity will be outlined that further brings a framework that intertwines with concepts of creativity, learning, playfulness, fun, and participation. This framework addresses why and how visitors in smart museums may learn creative and playful experience through participation with new technologies. Furthermore, by taking emerging smart museums in China as a case, this article also brings implications for other cultures on how to develop diverse methods and varies strategies for encouraging public participation in smart city planning in the future.

KEYWORDS

Chinese Culture, Creative Tourism, Creativity, Learning, Playfulness, Public Participation, Smart City, Smart Museum

INTRODUCTION

Generally, we define creativity as generation of new and useful ideas that can be considered as one of elements in process of innovation (Zhou, 2018). In recent years, this notion has been identified in many different social and academic fields, including urban development, cultural policy, economy, aesthetics, academic writing, theater, architecture and education (Richards, 2011). Moreover, creativity has become a new strategy to shape cities and regions in a search for growth, as well as a strategy for promoting innovation and individual skills development. This has further brought a series of concepts that have been paid much attention, such as “creative economy,” “creative cities,” “creative class,” and “creative clusters” (Richard, 2005).

Recently creative tourism is growing in popularity, by which creativity has been underpinned as a means of transforming resources into capital that is a way to stimulate, improve and transform the functionality of a region. Creative tourism has been developed in many countries, including New Zealand, Austria, Spain, Canada, the United States, and Mainland China (Richard, 2005; Richards, 2011). The emergence of creative tourism is the inevitable effect of a transition from the “era of mass tourism” to the “era of mass leisure” and now to the “era of personal experience” (Li, 2011). The main characteristics of this transition is that it fundamentally breaks the bondage of traditional thinking and achieved regional economic and cultural appreciation. Creative tourism has been identified as an extension of or a reaction to cultural tourism, in that tourists are looking for more interactive experiences which help them in their production and consumption of tourism (Tan, Kung, & Luh,
2012). Within this paradigm, the core of creative tourism are participative, authentic experiences that allow tourists to develop their potential and skills through contact with local people and their culture (Richard, 2011). This further means creative tourists can be viewed as a group of active stakeholders, as without their active participation, the creative experiences would not exist (Tan et al., 2012).

Undoubtedly, the growth of creative tourism facilitates development of smart cities. As Li (2011) addressed, creativity plays a key role in shaping a city’s cultural atmosphere and city branding. It can also help to improve the quality of urban life. Meanwhile, the Internet, big data, and other digital technologies have been enablers of e-services provided to the public. Smart cities are increasingly assuming a critical role as drives of innovation in areas such as heath, inclusion, environment, and business (Kroes, 2010). Emerging technologies are increasingly involved in the creation of new tourism experiences as well as all city economic activities and utilities can be seen as innovation ecosystems in which citizens and organizations participate in the development. (Schaffers et al., 2011). As Li (2011) addressed, driven by the trend of “pleasure-oriented consumption,” there is an increasing number of people who look for personalized tourism products with distinctive features to enrich their journey and experiences; there is also an increasing number of products and services have begun to provide entertainment functions that combines entertainment activities with creative tourism. Playfulness is therefore one of key elements to encourage public participation of new technologies that further reflects more and more technology designs for improving attraction of destinations and enriching creative experience of tourists.

It should be noted that recently, emerging technologies in smart museums have been recognized their potential to motivate creative learning, stimulate playfulness, reveal unheard or silenced history stories, provide alternative experiences, and encourage emotional responses of visitors. It is well known that traditionally, museums were used to be places of “no touching,” which means visitors should not touch pieces in exhibition, they just look at them. Smart museums are not just a place to hang art; they have become engaging and memorable experiences for people of all ages. Therefore, smart museums have been recognized as good strategies to facilitate public participation in city planning, especially in some innovation environments where cultural barriers exist. In China, historically, citizen participation in the management of technology innovation is very weak, this is due to influences of traditional Confucianism that leads to most Chinese people to fear of proposing new suggestions and challenging authority. However, supported by new strategy of developing an “innovation-oriented nation,” China sees itself building its future prosperity on innovation in which everyone’s creative potential is tapped; there is a growing number of smart museums where new technologies have been applied fundamentally changing for towards interactive experiences and therefore, encouraging public participation in creative tourism and smart city development.

Following above lines, this article addresses two questions: 1) why and how do visitors in smart museums learn creative and playful experience through participation with new technologies? And 2) Based on a discussion of smart museums in China, what can we understand interplays between public participation of new technologies and development of smart creative tourism that brings opportunities of overcoming cultural barriers to innovation? The two questions will help to organize the following sections in this article.

**A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE TO CREATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

**UNDERSTANDING ON CREATIVITY**

Creativity is related to human activities to generate new and useful ideas, including scientific discovery, technological innovation, social innovation, and artistic imagination (Thagard & Stewart, 2011). Two most common characteristics of creativity have been identified in the literature: newness or uniqueness and value or utility (Zhou, 2018). As Zhou and Luo (2012) suggested, creativity studies were started from the 1950s focusing on personality, cognition, and stimuli. During the past years,
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