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CREATIVE TOURISM EXPERIENCES: COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES OF HERITAGE TOURISM IN SHANXI PROVINCE

Unique sites, product variety and authentic experiences increase the value added of investment in this tourism destination

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Abstract

Shanxi Province invests primarily in key local industries as coalmining and metalworking, but also in agriculture, tourism, and other sectors. In addition to heritage tourism, tourists who have chosen to visit this well-known Chinese province for religious, educational, festival, culinary, and other types of tourism can also enjoy creative experiences. The province builds its tourist image as a “depository of Buddhist monuments and art”, increasing its competitive advantages as a destination by investing in modern infrastructure and tourism sites.

Keywords: destination, heritage tourism, creative experiences, product variety, Shanxi Province, UNESCO World Heritage List

The success of the Shanxi Province tourism industry is linked to authentic experiences and unique sites featuring rich product diversity. The ancient town of Pingyao and the Yungang Grottoes, included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, are located here, as well as the more than 50 temples in Mount Wutai, one of China’s sacred mountains hosting the country’s oldest wooden temple. As a tourist destination, Shanxi attracts visitors with its famous Hanging Monastery, the Ice Cave, a fascinating natural phenomenon, and many other landmarks.

Pingyao, a city built in a square plan around 11th century A.D., is considered by researchers as giving tourists the best idea of China’s culture, society, economy, and religion. The oldest structures are unique pieces of architecture and most of the over 4,000 exciting civil buildings in Pingyao date back to the Ming and Qing dynasties. The city has two areas: an ancient and a modern one. About 400 different types of dwellings are relatively well preserved, as well as more than 1,000 stelae in the ancient part of the city. The six big temple complexes exhibit ancient building techniques.

The ancient city is a unique piece of architectural and cultural heritage. Its surface of 55.6 hectares is enclosed in a 6 km long, 12 m high, and 3 to 6 m wide stone-and-brick defensive wall with 72 watch towers along its length. The four-meter wide ditch around is used as an additional water stock to fight fire.

From a bird’s eye view, the city wall is a nearly-perfect square but the Chinese have assimilated it to a tortoise which is an animal they venerate for its longevity. Feng shui experts agree in their analyses of the ancient city’s plans that all this was done in the hope that the city would last for ages.

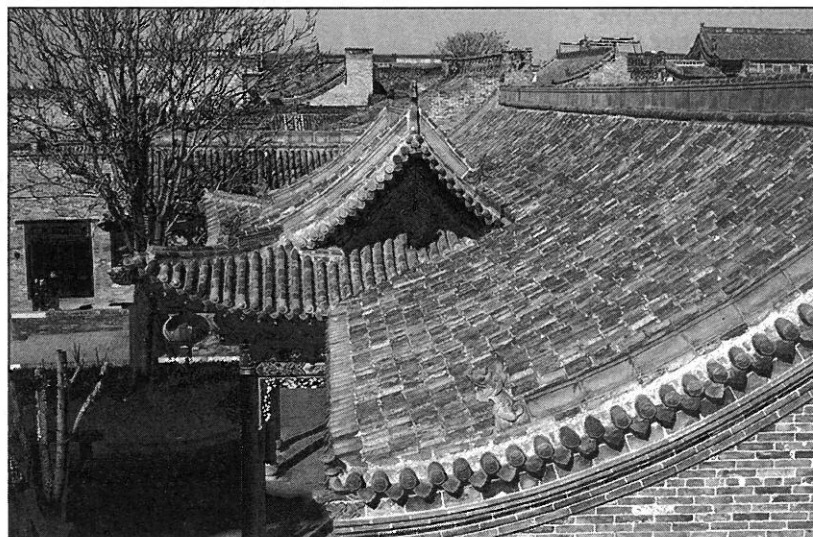


Foto 1

**Pingyao ancient city
is the best preserved
ancient county in China**

THE LINE BETWEEN TOURISM AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Pingyao attracts tourists from all over the world who wish to see China's best preserved ancient city and gaze at its unmatched architecture, museums, and tourist attractions. The city also attracts specialists who come here to analyse its architectural style, building materials, and traditional technology, as well as the way these have preserved the city's authentic spirit and culture over the centuries.

A great deal of research has been conducted and summarized in the best monographs on the city, explaining the message and philosophy of urban planning and layout of ancient Chinese cities. They unveil to experts and tourists alike how historical cityscape and heritage have been preserved. Creativity is a means for "transforming resources into capital"¹. "The line between tourism and creative industries (often called "cultural industries") is quite blurred in the city... Although it is problematic to assert that a form of tourism is non-cultural, as everything derives from cultural memory in some way, "cultural tourism" is likely to contain more aesthetic and symbolic elements than adventure or lifestyle tourism". (Wen, Keane 2014: 106).

There is a cleverly designed tourist attraction in Pingyao – a special scenario with music and people in old-fashioned costumes welcoming visitors in front of the ancient city walls. Tourists become part of an old-time ritual rather than be mere spectators. This remarkable military re-enactment captivates with the unfamiliar words, old-time uniforms, and ancient warriors' face expressions. Visitors identify themselves² with the historical characters on the background of local music and the hubbub of the crowd moving towards the city's huge gates. Surprise brings additional value to this ancient city with its public buildings, temples, dwellings, shops, and sculptures which have earned it a place on the World Heritage List.

Tourists have the opportunity to stay in renovated historic homes offering western amenities. One can return mentally 300 or 400 years back in time to feel the atmosphere of the mysterious patios and have a look into the daily life of Pingyao's past inhabitants. Creativity in designing museum attractions, restaurants, and souvenir industry has yielded an off-the-beaten-track tourism product to subtly attract visitors to Chinese history and culture. This product can be professionally managed and advertised, but the parallel between antiquity and modernity, between legend and knowledge is part of the psychology of emotions and cross-cultural differences.

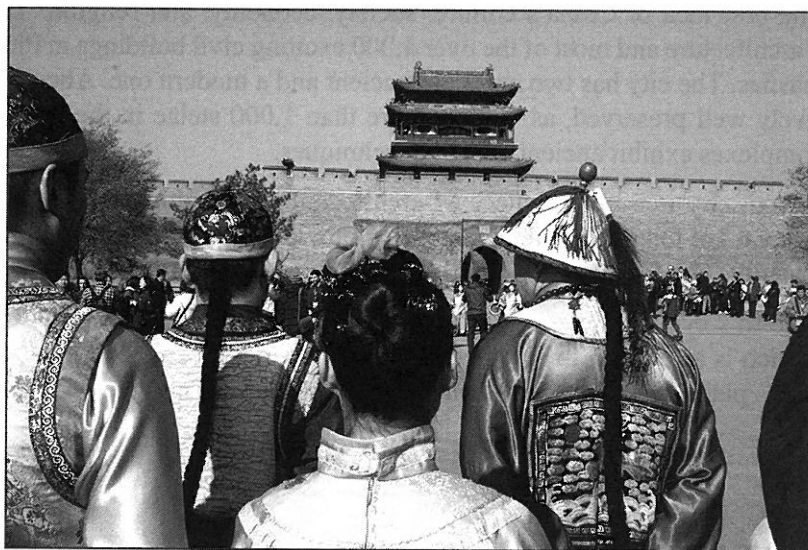


Foto 2

Tourists in Pingyao become part of an old-time ritual rather than being mere spectators.

Pingyao's old buildings are famous for their patios featuring unique architectural elements, stone steps, and red doors. Souvenirs, books, food and dusty antiques are sold everywhere in the long streets lined by ancient houses built of grey bricks. The most visited place in the very popular one-hundred-year-old "financial street" is a small old museum which answers the question about why the history of finance has been thoroughly studied in China's modern history.

¹ The policy advisor Li Wuwei (2011: 69) writes: "Creativity is a means for transforming resources into capital and is also a way for the tourism industries to develop, exploit and integrate resources more deeply and extensively." – *Developing creative service industries in Hangzhou, People's Republic of China*. In: *Tourism and the Creative Economy*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2014. p. 106

² Today modern tourism "seeks to apply creative strategies to transform tangible and intangible resources into marketable products" – idem, p. 106–107

According to historical data, Pingyao owed its fame across the country to economic prosperity and vibrant trade. This is where the first banking institution – the Rishengchang Draft Bank – was founded. It issued banknotes and changed the country’s financial life. It was called “the world’s First bank” and its activities grew to spread across the whole of China and then to Japan, Singapore, Russia and elsewhere³. In Pingyao alone, there were 22 banks which was the half of all banks in China at the time. The old museum, small but unique, tells the story of the bank and its founders in great details and based on dozens of pieces of evidence.

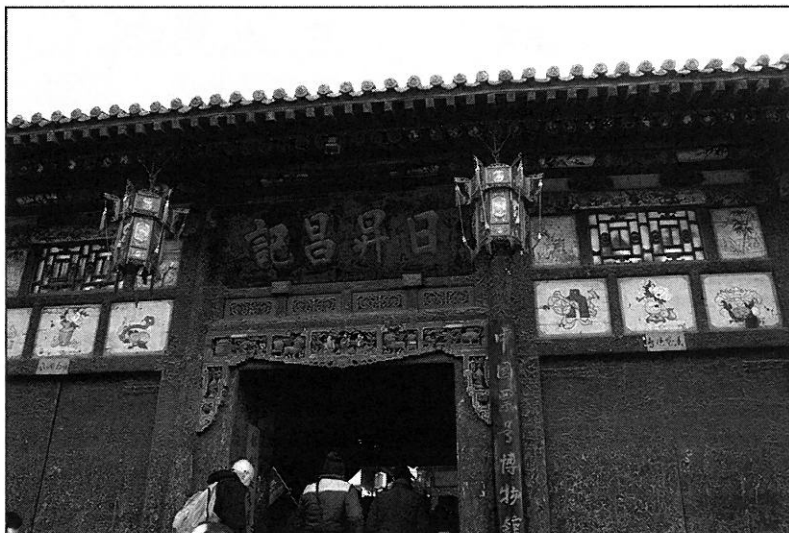


Foto 3

**The old
“financial street”
with Rishengchang
Draft Bank**

The transformation of the industry of perception into an industry of experience is an irreversible process which has changed the attitudes and expectations of tourists forever, according to researchers in the field of heritage tourism. The success of creative tourism and special events in which France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, the United States, and Turkey, among others, have been investing, has come to prove it. Drawing on modern scenarios, off-the-beaten-track attractions, up-to-date animation and technology, creative industries open new horizons to artists (producers, theatre intellectuals, musicians, scriptwriters, actors, performers, etc.)

The development of heritage tourism with its subtypes (religious, historical, educational, and festival) in the Shanxi Province came with the recognition of their key importance for the province’s economy and image. Government support and responsible businesses, as well as heavy investment in the infrastructure and preservation of cultural and natural heritage, have yielded tangible results. In terms of tourism development, the period after the global economic crisis has witnessed a shift towards creative industries and tourist attractions. The acknowledgement of the need for the Shanxi Province to diversify its tourism product has led to increased numbers of foreign and domestic tourists.

Planning, creation, and maintenance of tourist attractions require investment in destination marketing, recognizable image, and staff training and development. A destination’s attractiveness depends upon the availability of primary resources and related “unique opportunities for tourist activities”, as well as on the development of “infrastructure, superstructure, and the tourism industry with its goods and services” (Rakadjiiska, Marinov, Dyankov 2013: 428). However, attractiveness stems directly from image as “a platform for expectations from travelling to a destination” because image “plays the role of a powerful force capable of driving of impeding tourism demand” (Rakadjiiska, Marinov, Dyankov 2013: 429).

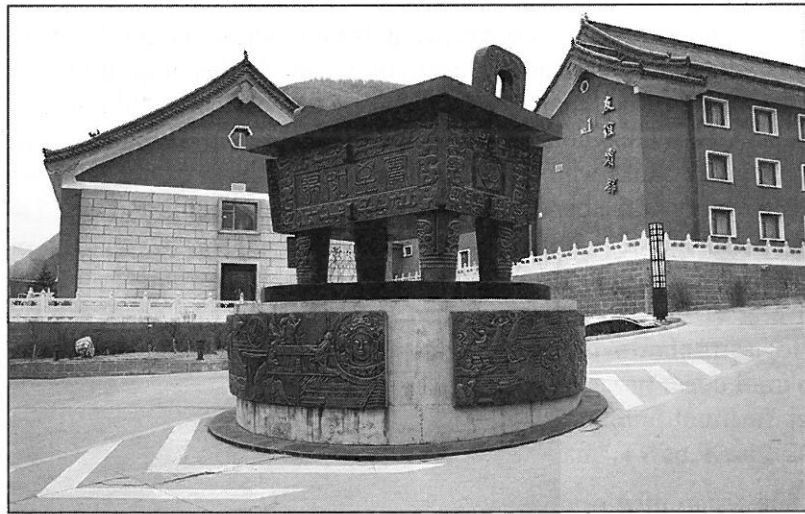
INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

Modern tourism development depends on existing infrastructure, especially in the light of the requirements related to new technologies in civil engineering, transport, communications, etc. Being a prosperous industrial area, the Shanxi Province has a well-developed and rapidly growing modern infrastructure which is essential to tourism investment. All other conditions being equal, “a better infrastructure is determinant for the economic activity and migration to a region”. Tourist transportation, accommodation, catering, and entertainment are directly related to the actual level of development of technical infrastructure. In the lack of infrastructure, “the efforts to make a tourism product more competitive make no sense” (Ribov 2011: 175).

³ Rishengchang – “the first exchange shop in China” and the earliest founder of modern banks in China, used to set up branches successively in Shandong, Henan, Liaoning, Jiangsu, etc. – see more in Shanxi Tourism – Friendly and Beautiful Shanxi, publ. Tourism Administration Bureau of Shanxi Province, 2014, p. 27.

Foto 4

**Wutai Mountain
– Youyi Hotel in a
humongous mountain
tourist complex**



In the second place, building a superstructure is crucial to tourism development; tourism is impossible “without tourist facilities even in the presence of unique natural or man-made resources”. At the same time, this is a two-way relationship, since the availability of tourism resources is a prerequisite for “building a tourist superstructure while the type of resources determines the variety of superstructure” (Ribov 2011: 176). The provinces’ superstructure consists of a great many well-equipped modern accommodation, catering, shopping, entertainment, and sporting facilities matching the needs of tourist groups and individual tourists. It features a great variety of facilities in terms of type, rating, capacity, and location.

Luxurious hotels offering all amenities have been built in the cities and the mountain areas alike. The great amount of tourism resources and tourist flows in this cradle of Chinese civilisation require a good balance between infrastructure and superstructure in terms of capacity and quality.

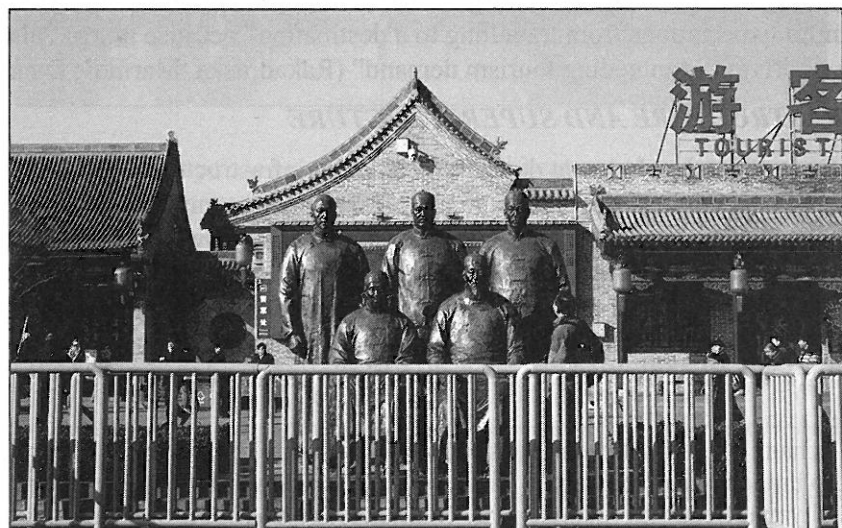
TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS

A tourism destination’s competitiveness today depends upon “the type and nature of products it produces and sells. What matters is the destination’s capability of offering added value products that allow it to preserve its resources and maintain its position to competitors in the marketplace”. In an increasingly competitive market, successful tourism destinations are those “where tourism generates sustainable economic prosperity for the population of the tourist place” (Koprinarov 2014: 768).

Moreover, a tourism destination’s competitiveness is the result of “its public image and the way the destination is perceived; customer motivation is largely influenced by this image. A destination’s image is not a constant value; it is a variable which depends upon the knowledge, experience, and socio-demographic characteristics of the public (potential tourists)”. In the context of globalization which has an impact on competition in tourism, the challenge goes to the players in the tourism business. They have to compete for “each tourist’s attention, respect, and trust. Strong positive brands confer a decisive competitive advantage. It is essential that regions become aware of how they are perceived by nationals of other countries, and how a region’s achievements, failures, population, and products affect its brand” (Alexieva, Temelkova 2014: 1081–1085).

Foto 5

**Tour in Qiao’s
Family Countryard
in Qi Country –
over 40 films and
TV series have been
shot here.**



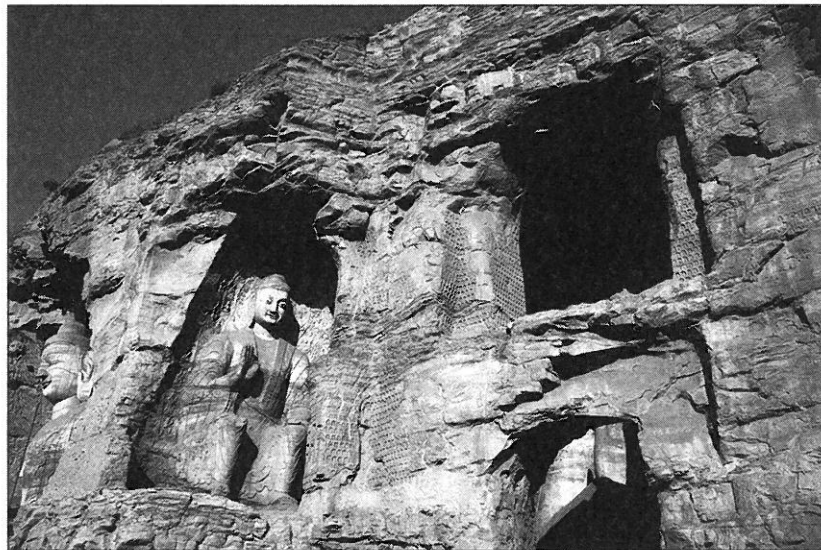
THE POWER OF COGNITIVE EXPERIENCE

Shanxi has 119 relics under national protection, the largest number in the country. The ancient city of Pingyao and the Yungang Grottoe are on the World Heritage List. Shanxi's more than three-thousand-year history, rich heritage and unique natural landmarks are a natural framework for heritage tourism development and cognitive experiences generating large numbers of international and domestic visitors. It is an illustration of how Chinese history, culture, folklore, music and famous cuisine are becoming a basis for creative tourist experiences or the so-called "new generation tourism". This is when tourists become actively involved in an "educational, emotional, and social interaction with the place's culture and local population's lifestyle" (Ivanova 2013: 121).

Since creativity is "an activity and an environment", creative resources are generally more sustainable than tangible heritage resources. This implies that unlike material heritage such as museums and monuments, "creative resources do not lose their value or degrade with time". Creativity has "greater mobility compared to tangible heritage resources"; also, "unlike traditional heritage resources, creative resources allow for a faster new value generation". Creative tourists travel because they seek "charm and experience which is a prerequisite for building customer loyalty". At the same time, in creative experience "authenticity" does not depend on external referents (individuals) or on a direct relationship with the experience but on "the transformed potential of the tourists' own experiences, imagination, and skills" (Ivanova 2013: 121).

Foto 6

**The world famous
Yungang Grottoes, also in
the UNESCO list**



UNESCO's definition of creative tourism puts the emphasis on experiences: creative tourism is defined as "travel directed toward an engaged and authentic experience". This type of tourism links people to a culture but also to the place where they can get to know this culture⁴: "Creative Tourism involves more interaction, in which the visitor has an educational, emotional, social, and participative interaction with the place, its living culture, and the people who live there".

CONCLUSION

Creative tourist experience has become a competitive advantage of heritage tourism in the Shanxi Province owing to the diversity of the tourism product offered and the uniqueness of natural resources. Tourists come to visit the many Buddhist temples in the Mount Wutai (Xiantong Temple, Tayuan Temple, Posa Top Temple and Pavilion of Ten Thousand Buddhs), the Yungang Grottoes, and the ancient city of Pingyao. They discover the legends about the Yellox River and Datong Nine-Dragon Screen and can have a beautiful and exciting "travel directed toward an engaged and authentic experience" enabling them to acquire knowledge about unique heritage sites.

Travellers' changing profile and customer requirements in the context of the increasingly profitable tourism business make creative tourism a trend that will shape the future of the industry: educational and participative, closely involved with local population and customs, and full of authentic experiences. China's Shanxi Province is yet another competitive destination in the global tourism marketplace which will attract

⁴ UNESCO's definition of creative tourism – In: *Towards Sustainable Strategies for Creative Tourism*, UNESCO – <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001598/159811E.pdf> – Read on 28.05.2015

millions of tourists to the cradle of Chinese civilization through new investment in landmark preservation, heritage tourism, and creative experiences. More aggressive online advertising and increased attention to integrated marketing communications, in addition to a more proactive promotion at international and national tourism expositions and markets, will enable the province to add new value to its image as “depository of Buddhist monuments and art”.

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