Assessing the experiential value of heritage assets: A case study of a Chinese heritage precinct, Bendigo, Australia

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HIGHLIGHTS
- The experiential value of heritage assets was analysed in Bendigo, Australia, using an audit tool.
- Some heritage assets may form the basis of peak tourist experiences, due to their importance or contrast to everyday life.
- Other heritage assets are best characterised as supporting experiences, providing a foil for peak experiences.
- Destinations possessing cultural assets might still struggle to attract tourists, based on their low experiential value.
- Heritage assets can be integrated with an interpretive theme and/or anchored with a hub as part of a precinct.

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ABSTRACT
Destination managers often wish to utilise heritage assets to create memorable visitor experiences, yet there is a paucity of research aimed at understanding how these experiences might be perceived and valued for tourism purposes. This article uses a cultural tourism potential audit tool to evaluate the experiential value of a collection of Chinese heritage assets in the regional city of Bendigo, Australia. The tool was expanded to include analysis of the type of experience, categorising them as either peak or supporting. Findings suggest that some of the heritage assets had high or moderate experiential value, with a few forming the basis of peak tourist experiences. Other heritage assets, whilst high in experiential value, are best conceptualised as supporting experiences. Through the aegis of a heritage precinct, both types of experience may collectively attract tourists, provided they are integrated with a meaningful and appealing narrative.

1. Introduction

Destination managers are increasingly keen to use heritage assets as a platform for encouraging tourism activity. This is particularly the case for regional or rural communities, where heritage may be seen as bestowing a ‘sustainable competitive advantage’ (McKercher & Ho, 2006, p. 474), both by making the destination distinctive and through generating revenue for preservation of the heritage. Achieving growth in tourism might also help to make these places attractive and liveable for residents. This is sometimes achieved through the creation of a heritage precinct, which may combine retail hubs, clusters of heritage buildings, attractive eating areas and interpretive trails or walks (McKercher & du Cros, 2002; Wait, 2000). These precincts require the development, and in some cases the commodification of heritage assets as tourist experiences, which help visitors to interpret the assets and make them meaningful as well as memorable (Moscardo, 1999). There is still a gap in our understanding of how successful tourist experiences might be created around a set of heritage assets (Hede, 2007; McKercher & Ho, 2006). This article takes steps towards filling this gap, by examining the experiential value of heritage assets in the city of Bendigo in central Victoria, Australia. The city is looking to promote these assets collectively as a precinct to visitors; however some are more likely than others to form the basis of tourist experiences. The local municipality, the City of Greater Bendigo, wished to set priorities for development of these assets, including...
upgrades or creation of new tourist infrastructure, so as to create more satisfying and sustainable tourism experiences. This study assisted in this process, including providing an input into development of strategies for the marketing of individual assets, as well as the precinct as an integrated whole.

Bendigo, the focus of this study, has a rich history linked to the nineteenth century gold rushes, particularly with respect to Chinese heritage. During the 1850s, parties of Chinese arrived in Victoria in response to reports circulating in Hong Kong and Canton Province of a new ‘Gold Mountain’, where a gold rush similar to the one occurring in California had already begun (Cusack, 2002). Many of these individuals later diversified their work from mining to other forms of industry, including market gardening (Frost, 2002), and settled permanently in the surrounding community. There are a number of important heritage assets in Bendigo built by or associated with the Chinese mining diaspora. These include the Golden Dragon Museum collection and the Chinese Masonic Temple or ‘Joss House’, which is the only surviving Chinese place of worship on the Victorian goldfields (Heritage Victoria, 2013a).

While other regional centres had similar patterns of immigration during the gold rushes, we argue that Bendigo possesses the most intact sites of Australian Chinese heritage dating from the nineteenth century diaspora, and in this regard, is potentially of international significance.

Bendigo is a medium-sized regional city, with a population of nearly 100,000, situated about 150 km or two hours’ drive north-east of Melbourne, the state capital of Victoria, and accessible by road and rail. The tourism base of the city is drawn mainly from the domestic market and is primarily day-trippers, with relatively few international tourists (Zhang & Murphy, 2009). In 2011, there were 1.76 million overseas visitors to Victoria, but only 36,000 international visitors stayed overnight in the Victorian Goldfields Region, of which Bendigo is a part (Tourism Victoria, 2011). Fig. 1 shows the location of Bendigo within the state of Victoria and in relation to the main towns of the Goldfields Region. Bendigo’s main competitor in the region is Ballarat, which attracts high numbers of tourists, particularly overseas Chinese visitors, who visit Sovereign Hill, a recreation of a nineteenth century gold town, as part of a typical tour of the State packaged specifically for this market (Frost, 2005; Zhang & Murphy, 2009). These tourists are not being drawn to Bendigo, which is a source of discontent for the City of Greater Bendigo, given the presence of Chinese heritage assets and the burgeoning numbers of Chinese tourists coming to Australia.

Recent developments have opened up opportunities to share Bendigo’s Chinese heritage with more visitors to the city, including extensions to the Golden Dragon Museum and the creation of an adjacent plaza for community events. The discovery of a nineteenth-century Chinese cross-draught brick-kiln near the Temple is another potential tourist asset. Built by A’Fok, Fok Sing and Co in 1859, it is ‘the only known example of such an Asian kiln found in Australia and possibly anywhere outside of China’ (Lovejoy, 2011, p. 9 – see also Heritage Council Victoria, 2006; Heritage Victoria, 2013b; Wells, 2005). The Chinese heritage of Bendigo exists alongside Victorian heritage such as the nineteenth century vista of View Street, grand landmarks such as the Shamrock Hotel (1854) and the Capital Theatre (1873), the historic Bendigo Tramway dating from 1890 (now a tourist tram), the Bendigo Pottery (1858) and the Central Deborah Gold Mine (1939). The map in Fig. 2 illustrates the layout of the city and the proximity of various sites to each other. This article will however concentrate on the Chinese heritage assets, as the focal point for the creation of a tourist precinct in Bendigo.

Regional cities like Bendigo are looking to boost overnight stays, rather than merely attracting day-trippers, as well as encouraging international visitors. This led the City of Greater Bendigo to commission an audit of the heritage assets of the city, as part of a brief to develop a marketing and interpretation plan for the Bendigo Chinese Heritage Precinct (Frost, Laing, Wheeler, Reeves, & Weiler, 2007). The municipality wanted to evaluate the potential of these assets to form the basis of tourist experiences, which they believed would strategically differentiate the city vis-à-vis its regional competitors, and encourage larger numbers and longer visitation. This article focuses on the approach used to design and carry out this audit and the implications of the findings for the city in terms of the challenges they face in turning heritage assets into memorable and engaging tourist experiences.

Fig. 1. Map of Victoria showing Bendigo’s location within the Victorian Goldfields Region.
We commence this article with a brief examination of current theories underpinning research on the tourist experience. We then outline the application and extension of the cultural tourism potential audit tool developed by McKercher and Ho (2006) to assess the experiential value of a suite of Chinese heritage assets across Bendigo, including a discussion of the merits and efficacy of the assessment model. This is followed by an outline of the methodology employed in this study. We then present the findings of the audit, followed by a discussion of the implications for Bendigo and the utility of the assessment tool. The article concludes with an analysis of how cities like Bendigo might use this approach and the data gleaned from these audits to develop integrated and sustainable tourist experiences.

2. Tourism experiences and heritage

While there appears to be general consensus on the desirability of creating tourist experiences, there is a divergence of opinions as to how to best achieve this aim (Edensor, 2001; Hayes & MacLeod, 2007; Quan & Wang, 2004; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). This diversity of views on what makes a successful tourist experience may partly be the result of multiple ways of understanding and defining the nature and scope of the tourist experience, as well as limited research to date on tools or measures to research the presence and strength of these experiential elements within a tourist destination.

The model developed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) is often cited in the literature as a starting point for conceptualising the tourist experience. They define consumer experiences in terms of an organisation using ‘services as the stage and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event’ (p. 98). This is based on the premise that experiences can be organised or engineered (O’Dell, 2005) and runs counter to the argument that perceived authenticity is an intrinsic part of many tourist experiences, particularly with respect to visits to historic or heritage sites (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003; Chronis, 2005; Cohen, 2004). The reference to perceived authenticity refers to the postmodern argument that authenticity is judged in the eye of the beholder, rather than assessed using some objective standard. It has been argued that the latter is impossible in any case, given the myriad meanings or realities that can be attached to artefacts or events and the fact that there is no common ground amongst scholars in relation to this concept (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). The evocation of existential authenticity might also be pertinent in this context. Wang (1999, 2000) observes that some tourists look to be or discover their true selves through the tourist experience.

Fig. 2. Map of Bendigo, showing Chinese heritage assets and tourist attractions.

Although ‘staging’ in the Pine and Gilmore sense need not necessarily ‘preclude authenticity’ (Chhabra et al., 2003, p. 715), too great a degree of commodification of heritage within the tourist experience can lead to a suspicion that what is being viewed is a ‘show’ rather than history (Chronis, 2005, p. 393). The unique and personal nature of tourist experiences (Sharpley & Stone, 2010) also suggests that they cannot be centrally scripted to appeal to visitors across the board. Tung and Ritchie (2011, p. 1369) argue that destination managers can merely ‘enhance the probability’ of delivering memorable experiences to tourists, through various planning strategies.
In contrast to the view that the tourist experience can be staged is the argument that it can be understood simply as an unstructured, accidental or organic event – a ‘serendipitous moment’, where the individual transcends being a tourist and loses themselves in the wonder of discovery (Hom Cary, 2004). This would make the tourist experience impossible to plan for or predict. This contention ignores the role that destinations can play in developing the elements (ingredients) that go to form or underpin the tourist experience, as well as their involvement in co-creating experiences.

The interactive quality of tourist experiences is noted in the literature. Rosh White and White (2009) refer to interactions between tourists and their hosts, while Hannam (2008, p. 131) defines experiences in terms of synergies created between provider and tourist, a level of cooperation that results in something that resonates and remains etched in memories: ‘Experiences provide sensory, embodied, emotional, cognitive and relational values and there is a focus on creation of synergies of meaning, consumption and loyalty’. There is a reciprocal dimension to this view of the tourist experience, with both parties contributing to its memorable quality. The experience thus appears to be co-constructed (Chronis, 2005) rather than a random or chance occurrence. Synergies can also be seen across experiences: ‘The quality of place a city offers can be summed up as an interrelated set of experiences’ (Florida, 2002, p. 232). This integration or linkages between different sets or types of experience across the urban landscape caters for different needs and lifestyles, while maintaining a clear identity and strong sense of place for the destination.

Tourist experiences can therefore be understood as emergent constructs, rather than the overtly engineered spectacles and performances endorsed by the Pine and Gilmore model. Personal engagement or a personal connection with visitors is generally agreed to be at the heart of the tourist experience (Ooi, 2005; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Prentice, 2004), making them problematic to conceptualise, let alone to design and market to a wide audience. As O’Dell (2005, p. 15) notes, ‘Experiences are highly personal, subjectively perceived, intangible, ever fleeting and continuously ongoing’. An individual’s mood and feelings, as well as their cultural/social background can affect them. According to Ooi (2005, p. 52): ‘Even if tourists say that they enjoy themselves, it does not necessarily mean that they all have the same exciting and memorable experiences’.

Tourist experiences are also dependent on the ingredients to be found at a particular destination (note that Pine and Gilmore would describe them as props or cues, extending the theatrical metaphor). Examples of ingredients in a tourism context might include the existence of primary attractions, such as heritage assets that have been developed for tourism purposes, and argues that experiential value is less probable, in that they relate primarily to the presentation of the asset’ (p. 486). In this article, however, we argue that experience value goes far beyond this, but may be difficult to control and manage for the reasons outlined above, including the intangibility
Table 1
Cultural tourism assessment indicators (McKercher & Ho, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural values</th>
<th>1. Do the stakeholders want tourists/tourism?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Can the asset withstand visitation without damaging its cultural values (tangible and intangible)?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Does the asset reflect a unique cultural tradition (living or disappeared)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Is the asset of local, regional or international cultural significance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Does a visit create an emotional connection with the individual?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Is the asset worth conserving as a representative example of the community’s heritage?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical values</th>
<th>1. Can all areas be accessed (if not, what can be done to rectify)?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Does the site represent potential hazards for visitors (if so, what can be done to rectify)?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. What is the physical state of repair (any wear and tear) and will its authenticity be damaged after repairs are made?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Can it be modified for use (legally, practically)?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Are both the site (inside its physical boundaries) and the setting (its surroundings) appealing to tourists?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product values</th>
<th>1. Is the site big enough to attract and retain tourists for a long time?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Is the effort required by tourists to get to it too difficult to make a visit worthwhile (time, cost, effort)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Is it near other attractions (similar or different types)?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Is there sufficient information about the site available (e.g. magazine, website)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Does the site have tourist market appeal?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiential values</th>
<th>1. Does this asset have the potential to offer interesting experiences to tourists?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. In what ways is this asset capable of providing a participatory, engaging and/or entertaining experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Is this asset capable of meeting different tourists’ expectations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. How authentic would general tourists perceive the experiences offered by the asset to be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Is good quality interpretation currently available and if not, how can it be provided?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of experiences and the role that the tourist might play in their creation.

The McKercher and Ho (2006) audit tool was considered to be appropriate for application in the context of Bendigo, given the number of small-scale assets, similar to those found in Hong Kong in the original study, as well as the need to assess the assets’ potential attraction and appeal to tourists. Our study however focused on appraising the product and more specifically the experiential values of heritage assets in Bendigo, given that the first two dimensions (cultural and physical values) were fairly consistent across the suite of assets. Each asset was assessed to have high cultural value (based on its Chinese heritage) and varying but still robust physical values (most could be accessed by tourists, and were neither unduly hazardous nor too fragile for visitation, provided some development occurred and security measures were implemented). While some assets were more visually appealing and pleasant to visit than others, product values varied between the assets in terms of market appeal (as discussed below) and the information currently available to tourists about the asset. Most of the assets were consistent in terms of their proximity to other attractions and the effort required by tourists to visit them, given that all were located within a 3 km radius of the centre of the city and were accessible by foot or via the tramway. Experiential values were even more divergent and are the primary focus of this article.

In using the series of questions developed by McKercher and Ho (2006) to establish product and experiential value of the various sites or assets, it was necessary to define certain concepts so that the researchers were using them consistently. The first was ‘authenticity’, which forms one of the five indicators of ‘experiential value’. For the purposes of this study, the researchers were required to assess the degree of authenticity as they or key stakeholders saw or perceived it (perceived authenticity), or as it related to an authentic sense of self, with respect to themselves or those stakeholders who were interviewed in this study (existential authenticity).

Another issue was the meaning of ‘participatory, engaging and/or entertaining experience’. Although this was largely self-evident, researchers took particular note of opportunities for visitor interaction or immersion (Moscardo, 1999) or the potential for stirring or evoking emotions (Poria, Reichel, & Biran, 2006).

The researchers construed the element of ‘good quality interpretation’ to be the presence of strong thematic stories, as well as enjoyable, relevant and well-organised interpretation, which together help to create more memorable and enjoyable visitor experiences. The existence of competing discourses or heritage dissonance within interpretation was also taken into account in assessing an asset’s experiential value. Heritage dissonance refers to the situation where heritage provokes disagreements or discord amongst different groups in the community (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). It has been argued that this dissonance in fact enlivens heritage interpretation and makes it more relevant and appealing, by bringing into the mix different and divergent perspectives and helping to communicate themes or narratives in a more interesting way to visitors (Frost, 2005, 2007; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Thus assets with some dissonance attached arguably have greater potential to form a satisfying tourist experience.

The approach used to evaluate the experiential potential of heritage assets in Bendigo incorporated some of the hallmarks identified by the literature on tourist experiences discussed above, namely: (1) the basic need for the experience to be enjoyable and memorable, (2) the link with authenticity, (3) the necessity of the asset being adaptable to the different needs and interests of visitors, (4) the importance of participation and engagement of visitors in creating a personal connection and (5) the role of interpretation as one of the ingredients of a memorable tourist experience. We felt that making this judgement with respect to an asset helps destination managers understand experiential value and categorise their heritage assets in a more nuanced way. Not all assets will lend themselves to ‘blockbuster’ experiences, but some may perform an important role in supporting those assets that do.

This article analyses the findings of this audit and explores its application to cultural heritage tourism development in a regional urban tourism destination in Victoria, Australia. We then consider the management and marketing implications of these findings for Bendigo, as well as similar regional heritage destinations.

4. Methods

The starting point for the study involved several researchers conducting the audit independently, across a series of heritage assets, sites and events in and around Bendigo. For the purpose of this analysis, these will be referred to as ‘assets’. The use of independent auditors followed the approach of McKercher and Ho (2006, p. 481), where all but one asset was assessed by at least two individuals, ‘who then wrote independent reports, enabling divergent views to be expressed’. This resulted in richer and more comprehensive data on each asset to be collected and ensured that the project team had intimate first-hand knowledge of each asset.

The visits were supplemented by interviews with representatives of 16 stakeholders about the assets within the precinct. Interviewees were either managers or individuals whose positions involved some interest in or knowledge of Bendigo’s Chinese
heritage assets. They represented key tourist attractions, local and state government departments, the local municipality, university campus, and community associations and interest groups. The names of these stakeholder groups and organisations were kept confidential, in line with research ethics protocol. Like the McKercher and Ho (2006) study, the aim was to conduct a supply-side assessment of the assets, rather than interviewing current or potential visitors. These interviews lasted for up to an hour and were recorded and transcribed.

Following McKercher and Ho (2006), the assets were given an overall assessment based on one of the following five categories: Low, Low/Moderate, Moderate, Moderate/High and High. This use of an ordinal scale marking system instead of a number ranking allowed an assessment of whether some assets were ‘better’ than others with respect to their product and experiential values, without quantifying the degree to which this was the case. It was felt that this approach was more appropriate for a qualitative study, which focuses on the relative quality of the assets.

The five heritage assets in Bendigo that were assessed in this study for their product and experiential value are listed and briefly described in Table 2.

Table 2: Assets included in the assessment of tourist experience potential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site/Asset</th>
<th>Description of Site/Asset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Golden Dragon Museum</td>
<td>Developed by the Bendigo Chinese Association as a space to house and preserve the Association’s collection of materials of historical and cultural significance to the Chinese community. Main attractions are the Chinese Dragons, including Sun Loong, the longest festival dragon in the world and his predecessor Loong, who is the oldest surviving example (Bendigo Chinese Association, 2013) and has been listed by the Heritage Council of Victoria (Heritage Victoria, 2013a). A plaza was constructed beside the Museum, which is available for Museum activities, including the Awakening of the Dragon ceremony during the Easter Festival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Hills Cemetery</td>
<td>The Cemetery contains a number of sites of Chinese burials, with graves marked with small footstones, in accordance with traditional Chinese beliefs and a Chinese Burning Tower, where offerings were burnt as part of the burial ritual. It is managed by the Bendigo Cemeteries Trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chinese Kiln Site at PepperGreen Farm</td>
<td>Site of the remains of a Chinese brick-kiln, constructed in 1859 and believed to be the only example remaining in Australia and potentially the only one outside of China (Heritage Council Victoria, 2006; Heritage Victoria, 2013b; Lovejoy, 2011; Wells, 2005). The PepperGreen Farm site is currently leased for a local community employment creation program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Temple</td>
<td>The Temple was built in the 1860s as a place of worship for Chinese sojourners and settlers. It is the only remaining temple of its kind in the Victorian goldfields (Heritage Victoria, 2013a) and is now operated by the Bendigo Trust, which opens it to the public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awakening the Dragon Ceremony and Dragon Parade at the Bendigo Easter Fair</td>
<td>The Easter Fair has been held in Bendigo since 1871 (Rasmussen, 2004; Roper, 1985). The Chinese Dragon Sun Loong is ‘awoken’ from sleep in a ceremony on Easter Sunday and then taken through the streets as the centrepiece of the Parade on Easter Monday. This is a community event, run by an organising committee, although the local Council plays a key role in managing and promoting the Fair.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An interpretive social sciences paradigm was adopted in this qualitative study, where the researchers attempted to enter the world of the tourist (Blumer, 1962). This study uses a mixture of ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ perspectives. An emic perspective refers to a study where the researcher becomes an ‘insider’ and ‘uses the knowledge bases of the setting, the people and the latter’s explanations and language to describe the phenomenon being studied’ (Jennings, 2001, p. 440). Through personal visits to various sites, the researcher stands in the shoes of a visitor. The subsequent assessment phase however required the researchers to take more of an etic or outsider’s perspective, in order to be able to step back and detach themselves from the study (Fetterman, 1989; Franklin, 2003; Jennings, 2001).

5. Findings

The outcome of the audit in terms of the experiential value of the five Chinese heritage assets in Bendigo is summarised in Table 3. Assets were categorised and assessed for experiential value using the indicators developed by McKercher and Ho (2006), extended to include the categorisation of tourist experiences by Quan and Wang (2004) as either peak or supporting.

The case of Bendigo revealed a hierarchy of types of visitor experience with respect to the Chinese cultural heritage assets studied. The category ‘Peak Experience’ was used in relation to two assets that were regarded as integral or leading ingredients in peak touristic experiences in Bendigo (Quan & Wang, 2004) — the Awakening of the Dragon Ceremony and Dragon Parade at the Bendigo Easter Fair and the Golden Dragon Museum. The other category, ‘Supporting Experience’, following the definition developed by Quan and Wang (2004), was used in reference to assets that were simply a foil or backdrop to a peak experience. This was likely to remain so, even if they were developed to a greater degree than is presently the case. Sometimes, this development is not seen as appropriate or even possible, given the nature of the asset. This category was applied to the Chinese Temple, the Chinese Kiln at PepperGreen Farm and the White Hills Cemetery. Results of the audit assessment for each asset are presented below.

5.1. Awakening the Dragon Ceremony and Dragon Parade at the Bendigo Easter Fair

A rating of ‘High’ experiential value was given to the Dragon Parade, the centrepiece of the annual Bendigo Easter Fair (see Fig. 3). The Fair has been staged annually since 1871 (Rasmussen, 2004; Roper, 1985), and has strong links with the goldmining past of the city and a tradition of involving the local community in its events (Rasmussen, 2004). It is staged in close proximity to the other key attraction of the Golden Dragon Museum, where the Awakening of the Dragon ceremony is staged the day before the Parade. The Chinese community has been actively involved in the Parade since its inception and helped to raise funds for local charities (Heritage Victoria, 2013c; Rasmussen, 2004), providing a strong emotional connection with Bendigo society that continues to this day.

Overall, the Fair was assessed to provide a strong, engaging experience for visitors and had a broad tourist appeal. During the Parade, the city pulsates with energy and excitement, particularly with its colourful costumes, enthusiastic participants, stirring music and the theatre provided by the drums and banners. Each of the events of the Fair is close to the city centre and accessible by foot or via the tram.

As a festival approaching its 150th anniversary, this asset has high perceived authenticity. Many of the interviewees referred to having been the ‘legs’ of the dragon during past Parades, which
engendered an emotional response. As one stakeholder commented: ‘I think that’s why people love it so much ... it’s not just a show. It’s a community working really’. Another referred to the ‘sense of connection’ this engendered amongst local people. Others expressed pride in the Fair, particularly in the Chinese elements, which they regarded as an important link with history, symbolic of the present-day multiculturalism within Bendigo. This reveals a level of existential authenticity, in that the Parade provides a focus for community identity and sense of the self (Wang, 1999; 2000).

In terms of interpretation, the Easter Fair could benefit from bringing more of the Chinese heritage elements into the various events, not just the Parade and Awakening of the Dragon Ceremonies, by explaining to visitors how it is part of the broader Bendigo heritage narrative. This could be done through the use of commentary, perhaps by community volunteers, and signage, to set it in historical and cultural context.

5.2. The Golden Dragon Museum

As visitors enter the Golden Dragon Museum, they are struck by the vibrancy of the collection space. The use of colour, the substantial collection of artefacts, the lanterns, and the presence of a Chinese Dragon which encircles the room, all work to present historically and culturally distinct stories that are still alive within the Bendigo Chinese community. It is easily accessible by foot from central Bendigo, and is now flanked by a plaza area (Fig. 4), which is used for events connected with the Chinese in Bendigo, such as the Awakening of the Dragon ceremony. However, in order to fully capitalise on the potential experiential value of the Museum, more participatory, interactive experiences for tourists need to be developed.

Technology is absent from the displays, such as computerised touch screens, which visitors could probe for further information of interest, or video footage, bringing the world of the nineteenth century Chinese to life. Audio tours using handheld devices are also not available, which are generally popular with visitors to museums, albeit with the potential downside of inhibiting social interaction (Walter, 1996). There is a tired quality about the signage and labels for the individual exhibits, which needs attention. Interpretation currently lacks a strong overall theme or supporting sub-themes, which integrates the Museum collection with other Chinese heritage assets across the city, along the lines of the themes suggested in the Discussion section of this article.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asset</th>
<th>Type of experience</th>
<th>Experiential value</th>
<th>Qualitative evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awakening of the Dragon Ceremony and Dragon Parade at the Bendigo Easter Fair</td>
<td>Peak</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Highly authentic with broad appeal, although may need development to reach a more discerning heritage visitor. This might require incorporation of Chinese heritage within other events connected with the Easter Fair, other than the Parade, to help explain the broader history of the Chinese in Bendigo. This will help put the Parade into context for visitors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Dragon Museum</td>
<td>Peak</td>
<td>Moderate/High</td>
<td>Has tourist potential based on the collection and high perceived authenticity linked to the Bendigo Chinese Association, but generally lacks participatory or interactive experiences. More thematic interpretation would enhance the experiential value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Temple</td>
<td>Supporting</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>As above, similar to that for the Golden Dragon Museum. Site development and interpretation would need to be carried out in a culturally and spiritually sensitive way, given the status of the site as a place of worship for the local Chinese community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Hills Cemetery</td>
<td>Supporting</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High perceived authenticity but lacks interpretation for visitors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chinese Kiln at PepperGreen Farm</td>
<td>Supporting</td>
<td>Low/Moderate</td>
<td>High perceived authenticity but not developed, accessible or interpreted for visitors. This asset has the potential for greater experiential value if the site is developed and interpreted appropriately.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Golden Dragon Museum was thus rated as offering moderate experiential value but probably had the most potential overall for improving this rating, given the authenticity of its collection, level of community engagement, and the existence of friendly and helpful staff and management who were open and willing to try new avenues and dedicated to building relationships with visitors.

The authenticity of the Museum was remarked upon by a number of stakeholders. This related in part to its collection, but also its status as a stronghold of the Chinese community, as an authentic, despite the fact that we don't have a large Chinese community. But I think the city embraces [the culture] and you've got community active within it.

For some, this link with the Chinese community was deeply emotional. For example: 'In the Elders' Room and when we have our Chinese ceremonies, it has that spirituality'. This Elders' Room within the Museum was also linked to the Chinese Temple in terms of high perceived as well as existential authenticity:

We have the Elders' Room and we have the [Temple]. And those two very small buildings are more important than the grander buildings [a reference to the more prominent Victorian architecture in Bendigo] and you've got to really get to know them and understand them. Don't worry about the flashing lights and the big displays and that. These two are the things that are meant to move you, emotionally and spiritually.

A pagoda development mooted for the environs of the Museum was however considered to be inappropriate and historically incongruent by several stakeholders. They mentioned that this would change the streetscape in a way that would not be in keeping with the original presence and feel of the area in the nineteenth century. It was seen as a simulacrum (Eco, 1986), or a blurring of the real and the fake. This project has yet to commence, perhaps reflecting community concerns that it would reduce the perceived authenticity of the site.

5.3. The Chinese Temple

The Chinese Temple is an important remnant of a nineteenth century building and cultural marker, recording the Chinese presence and experience on the goldfields, as well as a place of worship. It is a visually arresting building (see Fig. 5), and easily accessible by tram from the city centre. While it is now open seven days a week to visitors, it lacks established tourist infrastructure to facilitate access and tourism amenities on-site or nearby, to support the experience.

The authenticity of the Temple was perceived as high, both in intrinsic and existential terms. One stakeholder described it as a 'real relic from the nineteenth century' and its lack of tourism development was actually seen as a positive by many of the stakeholders interviewed. Members of the Chinese community referred to the Temple proprietorly, using the more pejorative term 'Joss House': 'This is another thing I like about my Joss House, I use the word "mine". Others referred to its role in enhancing community and personal identity: 'The Joss House will always be incredibly significant to any Chinese because of how long it's been there and in respect to ancestors and following those rituals'.

A number of stakeholders emphasised the spirituality of the Temple, as illustrated by the following comment: 'Guides must realise it's a holy place, it's a sanctified place'. This element was seen as important to preserve: 'We just need to make sure that the culture and that spirituality is protected, as in we don't have people who are not aware of that spirituality running it, and turning it into a bit of a circus'.

The main reasons that it was considered to be a supporting rather than a peak experience were its limited interpretation and the inherent vulnerability of the site, in that large numbers of visitors could not be accommodated without affecting the asset, both in terms of authenticity and from a conservation perspective. There is interpretive signage at the entrance but not throughout the site, which many of the stakeholders felt was indeed appropriate, due to its religious significance. The story of the Temple within the broader goldfields narrative however needs to be told if it is to attract tourists. One solution might be to ensure that guided tours are available for all visitors, as well as additional interpretation at an adjacent location, such as the Kiln site, which is discussed below. One stakeholder noted that the limited interpretation currently provided was however well received: 'I work as a volunteer at the Joss House. All the volunteers there give guided tours that are quite detailed. And the response from the public who go through there is just astronomical. It is truly amazing. So there's a thirst for that knowledge out there'.

5.4. White Hills Cemetery

White Hills Cemetery was also considered to be a supporting experience, despite its historical significance, as it is not set up nor likely to be able to be developed as a tourist site, given its primary function as a place of burial. It lacks interpretation and easy access and was seen as appealing only to a niche market of heritage enthusiasts or history buffs. Stakeholders mentioned the existential authenticity they associated with the site, based on ties to local history. One stakeholder, when discussing future development of the Bendigo Chinese Heritage Precinct, noted: 'Even tying in our cemeteries and things like that. People are interested in family history. There is a very, very strong story there'. One stakeholder referred to it as 'such a fantastically poignant sort of site ... those sad little headstones' [Note that the Chinese erected gravestones at
the foot rather than the head of each grave — see Fig. 6). While it was acknowledged that most visitors were not tourists, a number may still have an interest in finding out more about the story attached to the site. For example, one stakeholder commented: ‘I won’t say it’s a tourist in the Cemetery, but people are very, very keen to see a bit of past Bendigo history’. It was noted however by others that tourism development in a cemetery was inappropriate: ‘I know cemeteries are a point of interest in regards to genealogy and that, but I do have a conflicting problem with turning it into a tourist attraction’.

There could however be the potential for an interpretation centre at the nearby kiln site to weave in the story of the Cemetery, along with the Temple, as a place of spiritual significance and ‘one of the most authentic Chinese burial sites in Australia’ (Bendigo Cemeteries Trust, 2013). Stakeholders suggested that integration of the site with other Chinese associations in Bendigo might be achieved by creating a heritage trail. The path along the creek from the Kiln site to White Hills Cemetery was seen as a way to link the two sites, and ‘bring the Chinese heritage and the European heritage closer together’.

5.5. The Chinese Kiln at PepperGreen Farm

The Chinese Kiln, although highly authentic, is unlikely to ever become a peak tourist experience, given its isolated location, archaeological frailty, small size and niche market appeal (McKercher & Ho, 2006). It requires further archaeological excavation, as the preliminary dig in 2005 discovered that a larger structure remained under the adjacent road. Further work was carried out in 2012 and discussions are being held at present as to whether a full excavation is warranted (DPCD, 2013; Hagan, 2012).

The Kiln would need to be placed in context for visitors, in order to make it meaningful. For example, while the bricks made in situ were not used to build grand civic buildings such as the Shamrock Hotel and the Capital Theatre, they can be seen throughout Bendigo. A prominent example is the front garden wall of the Lysaght residence (Fig. 7) in Forest Street (Heritage Victoria, 2013d). Providing a tram stop at the Farm (Fig. 8) might also improve its experiential value for visitors, by making it more accessible, and linking the site to the nearby Chinese Temple.

Stakeholders acknowledged the distinctive heritage qualities of the Kiln. For example: ‘It’s the jigsaw piece that we are missing from the story’. People referred to it as being ‘real’ in the sense of intrinsic authenticity. The challenge is that this does not necessarily translate into a strong tourist attraction or experience (McKercher & Ho, 2006). Therefore it was assessed as a supporting experience, in that it had some appeal to heritage enthusiasts and might enhance their visitor experience, by showing the Chinese contribution to Bendigo over and above mining. One stakeholder noted the growing public interest in archaeology, which was felt might lead to some tourists wanting to visit an actual archaeological site and see artefacts in situ, or excavations taking place. Some stakeholders referred to the television program Time Team hosted by actor Tony Robinson as fuelling this interest: ‘a lot of surprising people are interested in archaeology these days’.

Low-impact development of the site for tourist purposes thus appears to be warranted, given it has some potential (although limited) market appeal. The Bendigo Trust is investigating the feasibility of this strategy, bearing in mind restrictions due to heritage protection of the site and the need for further (and potentially expensive) excavation to uncover the buried elements of the Kiln. Provision of interpretive signage or the construction of an interpretation centre nearby might give visitors a reason to visit the site and help them to make sense of it within the broader Bendigo narrative. Interactivity, as one stakeholder expressed it, would provide ‘that living heritage experience … something that actually alters mindsets’. Stakeholders felt that retaining authenticity across the site was vital; with any development ideally kept low-key and unobtrusive: ‘it’s essential that you don’t actually build any new sort of twee Chinese decorations’. This was perhaps an allusion to plans to build a pagoda in the environs of the Golden Dragon Museum. Any interpretive centre should not overwhelm the site: ‘I’m opposed to heavy handed sort of structures being sort of plonked down in historic places … once you put a big visitor display centre, it’s harder for people to imagine what was there’.

Interactive technology could be used to recreate a nineteenth century landscape. Given that any interpretation centre is unlikely
However, as one stakeholder acknowledged, which might not be able to support large numbers of visitors. In this case, portable hand-held audio devices or iPods could be rented from the Bendigo Visitor Centre for a small fee.

An important consideration however is the fragility of the site, which might not be able to support large numbers of visitors. However, as one stakeholder acknowledged, ‘it’s going to be a fairly specialised sort of tourist that’s going to be going out there’. This lack of appeal across a broad swath of tourism markets and segments contributed to the assessment of ‘low/moderate’ experiential value.

Stakeholders also felt that the Kiln site needed to have a distinct function that sets it apart from the Golden Dragon Museum, so that it is not seen as a ‘second museum’. The story thread should present a ‘sophisticated picture’ of life on the goldfields, including the Chinese role in industry and commerce, linked with the overall interpretive themes for the precinct discussed in the next section. One interviewee liked the idea of giving people something to discover: ‘Getting people to follow their nose and wander around without too much heavy interpretation’, supporting the idea of a Bendigo Heritage Trail.

6. Discussion

Bendigo has strong claims to position itself as the primary destination for experiencing the heritage of the Chinese in the great Australian Gold Rushes of the nineteenth century. However, many of its heritage assets require further development to reach their tourism potential. This potential may be limited in some instances, even with the benefits of a more integrated interpretation approach, and some assets may not be able to command many visitors, due to their narrow appeal. McKercher and Ho (2006, p. 486) observe that experiential values are ‘the easiest to resolve [for a destination], for they relate primarily to the presentation of the asset. Minor modifications to presentation can enhance the experience’. Our research suggests however that successfully capitalising on the ingredients for memorable tourist experiences requires more than cosmetic changes.

This study illustrates some of the challenges of developing tourist experiences, particularly in heritage settings. The latter is not sufficient to form the basis of a memorable tourist experience, without considerable work to develop and present heritage assets so as to make them meaningful to an increasingly demanding and sophisticated tourist audience (Buhalvis & Law, 2008; Jefferson, 1995). The balance that needs to be struck is to carry out that development in a way that raises the standard of the tourist experience across the board, without polarising the local community, many of whom have strong attachments to these assets and their history.

Some assets, while significant historically, are not set up for tourism. A pertinent comparison is the Hanseatic city of Ghent in Belgium, which received World Heritage listing for its béguinages; the rich architectural heritage left behind by mediaeval communities of Flemish women who dedicated their lives to their religious beliefs without closing themselves off from the world in a convent or nunnery (Jansen-Verbeke & Govers, 2009). These places have extraordinary cultural value and are an oasis of calm and spirituality in a busy city, but are neither able to accommodate nor likely to attract the tourist, given their minimal signage and interpretation and location on the fringe of the main city centre. The Kiln site at Bendigo is likely to encounter the same problems.

Recommendations for improving the experiential value of heritage assets in Bendigo include (1) the introduction of thematic interpretation integrated across a range of attractions; (2) improving the transport links to peripheral (in a geographic sense) heritage assets; (3) creating trails and tours to connect the various assets across the city, which could be used for guided or self-guided tours; (4) allowing the public regular and scheduled access to the excavation of the Kiln; and (5) marketing the assets collectively as a ‘heritage precinct’.

Stakeholders understood that interpretation is the key to tying the various assets together, as the following quote illustrates:

I think it’s important that there’s interpretation over the whole site so that it can be linked and form a general overall picture of the Chinese in Bendigo and fitting in with the general story of Bendigo. So I think the interpretation’s important because people might see them [the heritage assets] in isolation still. They see the Joss House and the PepperGreen Farm where the Kiln is and the Golden Dragon Museum, perhaps in isolation.

An overarching theme should be developed for interpretation of the precinct. One possibility is to highlight the fact that the Kiln, the Chinese camp, Chinatown (the site of the present day Golden Dragon Museum) and Chinese participation in the Easter Fair were not only expressions of Chinese cultural and commercial activity but also forms of engagement with the European community. Sub-themes might include some or all of the following:

- The Gold Rush drew people from all over the world.
- The Chinese came for gold, but stayed and settled in Bendigo for other reasons.
- Chinese interactions with Europeans were complex, including elements of both conflict and co-operation.
- Water was important to the Chinese and their settlement follows Bendigo Creek.
- Chinese culture is now part of Australia’s shared heritage.

The suggested themes recognise that hidden voices such as immigrants, including the Chinese, need to be heard and unsettling discourses given their place alongside more traditional stories of the goldfields as places of opportunity and egalitarianism. As Goodman (2001, p. 34) observes: ‘We need to recover a sense of gold rushes as dangerous, edgy events with unpredictable outcomes’. This interpretation could use technology to a greater degree, such as audio tours, looped videos and touch screen displays, to make the assets more engaging and meaningful for visitors. Audio tours can be prepared in different languages and include sounds and music. They are appropriate for sites such as the Golden Dragon Museum, as a supplement to more traditional interpretive tools such as signs,
labels and brochures, but are particularly useful for the kiln site and the Chinese Temple, where ‘fixed interpretation’ is not possible or inappropriate (Willis, 2009). Reconstructions of life at the Kiln site might be usefully deployed, either as dioramas or via video displays, bringing the past alive in the absence of ‘substantial above-ground remains’ (Willis, 2009, p. 491). The Kiln site might also benefit from regular public access to archaeological excavations, which has proved successful at heritage attractions like Hadrian’s Wall in the United Kingdom (Willis, 2009). These programmes allow volunteers to assist trained archaeologists, as well as providing presentations on site to visitors. It is a way to introducing tangibility with respect to a spatially diffuse series of assets with ‘lessened materiality’ due to the passage of time, again, much like Hadrian’s Wall (Warnaby, Medway, & Bennison, 2010, p. 1378). The latter argue that this ‘fuzzy’ materiality can be used to marketing advantage, as it allows these places to be reimagined in creative ways.

Developing and marketing the assets as a precinct might involve creating a hub as its centrepiece, which would direct visitors to the other sites. An interpretation centre at the Kiln site is one possibility. This interpretation could encompass the history of its surroundings at PepperGreen Farm, linking heritage to gastronomic trends, namely the push towards local produce and authentic food experiences (Quan & Wang, 2004; Yeoman, Brass, & McMahon-Beattie, 2007). The Golden Dragon Museum is another potential hub, given its proximity to the centre of Bendigo, established infrastructure and resources, including permanent staff on duty, and strong cultural connections with the Chinese community. Integration of the Kiln site with the Temple was regarded as particularly important, given their historical links: ‘The two should work together. They are the remaining pieces of that [Chinese] camp’. Stakeholders however recognised that integration should go beyond the Kiln and the Temple, to encompass other Chinese heritage assets in Bendigo. The following comment by a stakeholder illustrates this desire to make sense of the individual assets in terms of a unified whole or precinct:

I ask why is the [Temple] way out of the city? Sitting on its own, this little tiny gorgeous building. It doesn’t make sense. But if you redevelop the whole precinct, it then does start to make sense.

The importance of having a clearer understanding of the nature of an experience is also highlighted in this study. The conceptualisation of an experience as a judicious blending of various ‘ingredients’ by visitors requires a variety of integrated experiences or assets that visitors can ‘package’ into their own personal and memorable experience. These ingredients include not just the heritage setting and high perceived authenticity, but also quality interpretation and supporting experiences that are in harmony with the heritage setting, so as to maintain strong feelings of authenticity, both intrinsic and existential.

The auditing process used in this study can be used to underpin the creation of a heritage precinct or a package of heritage experiences by a destination, by informing the development, marketing and interpretation of a series of heritage assets. An in-depth analysis of the critical elements of a heritage precinct is beyond the scope of this article, as we focus on the assessment of experiential value of the various heritage assets. The former however warrants further research, as it is often a plank in the marketing of heritage in a tourist setting, without an in-depth and consistent understanding of the ingredients of a successful precinct.

7. Conclusion

This study applied the tourism potential audit tool developed by McKercher and Ho (2006) to assess the tourist experience potential of smaller cultural heritage assets in a regional destination. The tool was extended to take into account current research on the nature of and elements of a tourist experience, particularly the work done by Quan and Wang (2004) on peak and supporting experiences. Overall, the study reveals that use of an experience assessment tool appears to be effective in analysing heritage tourism potential. The audit tool has now been applied in a regional urban setting in Australia, as well as its original Hong Kong urban context. Future studies might apply the tool across a broader range of destination settings and suites of heritage assets, to assess its broader utility in heritage tourism development and management.

Application of the assessment model reveals why many destinations with cultural assets struggle to attract tourists. These assets often possess experiential deficiencies that render them less appealing to visitors than better known, better-developed and more accessible attractions. This implies that marketing and promotion of these assets to increase visitor demand may be difficult. Some of the Chinese assets in Bendigo, chiefly the Kiln and the Cemetery, are unlikely to form the basis of mainstream tourist experiences, unless significant development takes place, which may be inappropriate in this context and detract from their appeal, based on the views of interviewees in this study.

Even those assets that have moderate or high experiential value might not constitute a peak tourist experience. A number of the assets in this study were categorised as a supporting experience. They act as a foil for the more exciting peak experiences, but may require development to achieve this goal. The case of Bendigo shows that this commodification of a heritage asset may neither be welcomed by stakeholders, nor considered appropriate in some instances. Both types of experience need to be integrated together in order to create a cohesive and appealing narrative for tourists, and, in the example of Bendigo, a vibrant heritage precinct.

Future studies might explore the role of authenticity in the development of tourist experiences in heritage settings, given our findings of its importance in the Bendigo context. As Franklin observes (2003, p. 200): ‘The notion of the authentic belongs to the differentiating and discriminating nature of high culture, and as high cultures of varying kinds have collapsed into various kinds of popular culture that are both localised and globalised, it has become an illusive quality’. However, our findings suggest that it is potentially an important element for both mass and niche tourists, and need not be reserved for peak cultural experiences.

There may also be merit in expanding the tool to assess the role of the tourist in creating these experiences. This builds on the idea of heritage as performance (Franklin, 2003), where the tourist constructs their own sense of heritage and may seek to question or query the status quo of what is presented to them (Bruner, 2001; Chronis, 2005). This accords with the growing appreciation of the active role of tourists within the visitor experience; less the passive recipient than co-creator, provided that the appropriate range and quality of ingredients are effectively integrated within a destination or region.

References


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