

Case study 4.2: Commodification and authenticity of souvenirs

Souvenirs are regarded as one of the most significant material and tangible markers and mementos of travelling experiences and memories. They play a significant role in mediating cultural interaction between tourists and host people. But it is often said that the meanings of souvenirs as unique cultural markers have become tainted with the mass production and replication of souvenirs, particularly traditional local arts and crafts. Local arts and crafts, which used to be traditionally produced on a small scale, have become commercially manufactured on a mass scale to meet the increasing demands of tourists.

Authenticity and commodification in heritage tourism

Unique cultural and heritage products have thus been modified and transformed 'in response to the impositions or temptations from large-scale and sometimes far-away consumers' (Appadurai, 1986: 47). Hence, the debates over the commodification of souvenirs and its subsequent impact on the authenticity of local cultural products have consistently attracted scholastic attention (see Graburn, 1967; McKean, 1976; Cohen, 1988; Hume, 2009). 'Airport art' (Graburn, 1967) refers to local arts and crafts that have been produced and marketed to look authentic to mislead tourists. Souvenirs have even been demeaned as 'tourist kitsch' or 'tourist tat', tasteless and tawdry products transformed through excessive commodification. The uncontrolled proliferation of tasteless souvenirs has had a negative impact on promoting and sustaining the unique cultural traditions of destinations. Even in 2011, a summit was held in Tuscany, Italy, with the aim of regulating the souvenir trade in renowned cultural heritage tourism destinations in the region. However, the process of commodification in turning local arts and crafts into souvenirs has also led to some positive changes in a variety of contexts. Using the example of the commodified figurative embroideries of Hmong (Meo) refugees from Laos, Cohen (1988) brings attention to the possibility of conferring different authentic messages to cultural products targeted for external audiences, including tourists. Here, souvenirs can act as new cultural expressions manifesting emergent authenticity. It is thus possible that certain cultural and heritage products developed for tourists have become authentic over time, facilitating new interpretations and purposes. Hitchcock (2000) also pinpoints the difficulty of distinguishing between a 'touristic' and 'traditional' artefact in some places where there is a long experience of international trade. The process of commodification has unmistakably impacted on the production, promotion and distribution of cultural products as souvenirs. Instead of destroying the meaning of cultural products, it may create new cultural meanings of souvenirs. In explicating the increasing recognition and inclusion of tourist art in museums and art galleries, Hume (2009) argues that the repetitive production in the making of souvenirs does not always result in reducing the aesthetic standards of local cultural products. He also emphasises tourists' roles as consumers in the generation of the collective memory. However, Briassoulis and der Stroaten (2000) warn that emergent authenticity dislocates local culture and heritage, encouraging the transformation of cultural heritage as an idealised product for touristic consumption. According to Ooi (2002), the concept of emergent authenticity ignores the resistance and concerns of the host societies. Academic debates over the commodification and authenticity of souvenirs will continue to grow. Issues such as empowerment and cultural property rights in the commodification of local arts and crafts need to be more rigorously investigated in future studies. Furthermore, examining and evaluating the authenticity of souvenirs needs to take into account such variables as originality, workmanship, aesthetics, function, cultural and historic integrity and shopping experience (see Littrell *et al.*, 1993).