

## **Immersive Imaginations: Exploring Tianjin's Historic Concessions with “Time travelling” experiences.**

Immersive experiences, by allowing the overlay of visitors' experiences with their environment, have become a new growth point in the experience economy and tourism industry, enhancing the appeal of destinations (Pratisto et al., 2022). In addition to the popular use of AR and VR technologies, immersive activities are also a growing category, including participatory theaters, escape rooms, and interactive games (Sobitan and Vlachos, 2020), inviting visitors to have interactive and playful experiences (Biggin, 2017). New fusion models have emerged among audiences, performers, and destination spaces (Howson-Griffiths, 2020), reshaping the interaction between visitors and destinations in a multisensory manner and influencing the way visitors perceive destinations (Aksenova and Gebbels, 2022).

Immersive experience projects establish new attractions and growth points for destinations (Pakhalov and Rozhkova, 2020) but also serve as intermediaries for tourists to engage with the cultural interpretation of the destination. They engage visitors to a more fictional understanding of history and culture (Robaina-Calderín et al., 2023). Visitors may even experience an "ideal reality" or "beyond reality" experience (Alston, 2016) where they are not just spectators but active participants of a story which can be co-written by them (Kokai and Robson, 2019), gaining a tourist experience-centered journey through patterns of personal "entrepreneurship" (Alston, 2013). This results in the dual construction of destination imagination: not only does the text of immersive visit provide a virtual construction of destination imagination, but also the participation of visitors is an imaginative practice that constitutes their responsive imagery to this imagination.

This article aims to explore the interaction between tourist imagination and immersive destination products using the case of Tianjin, China, which was the home for nine international concessions. International concessions in East Asian cities, including China, emerged during the 19th and 20th centuries due to unequal treaties with foreign powers, often referred as “semi-colonial” spaces (Osterhammel, 1986). They had their own administration and urban planning systems, becoming hubs of experimentation with Western architecture, lifestyles and urban systems with Chinese elites living in them, thus forming a model of cultural “hybridization” (Gravari-Barbas et al., 2021). Today, some have been transformed into cultural heritage sites (Gravari-Barbas et al., 2021), attracting tourists, and contributing to urban development as unique international consumption and creative destinations with the visitors' expectations of experiencing a historically special culture.

In the former French Concession and British Concession areas of Tianjin, immersive experiences have become a popular part of tourism offerings. This includes immersive puzzle experiences, guided tours, and immersive performances. These performances showcase the history of the concessions, famous buildings, and historical figures associated with these areas. Through hands-on experiences with immersive projects, interviews with organizers and participating tourists, we aim to explore the following questions: Why has immersive performance become such a popular element in tourism within Tianjin's former concessions? How do these immersive experiences address the "discordant history" associated with the concessions and contribute to crafting an imaginative tourism destination? In what ways do tourists engage in cultural interpretation through immersive interactions, and how does this contribute to their development of a destination narrative for the former concessions in Tianjin? Is the fiction offered by immersive visits in Tianjin a means to offer alternative (more consensual and more acceptable versions) of the dissonant heritage of the concessions?

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