

# Hiroshima's Complex Relationship with Tourism

Paul Walsh

As the term “dark tourism” has entered the mainstream, lists of the world’s “top” dark sites have proliferated and Hiroshima is, more likely than not, to be found near the top of them. Ever since the A-bombing of the city in August 1945, the Hiroshima’s relationship with tourism has always been a complex one. Tourism, through the rebuilding of the former military hub as a “peace mecca”, was one of the main pillars of the post-war reconstruction plan proposed by civic leaders who sought to secure approval from the occupation forces and funds from the national government. In recent decades, in contrast to the outside view of the site of the world’s first nuclear attack as one of the world’s darkest spaces, Hiroshima city officials have attempted to promote what Lisa Yoneyama describes as a “bright” Hiroshima. As Japan experiences a significant increase in the number of overseas visitors, there is a growing desire to promote Hiroshima as a more “normal” tourist destination. This paper explores Hiroshima’s relationship to tourism over the seven decades since the A-bombing.

## 1. Dark Tourism

Following Rojeck’s use of the terms “fatal attractions” and “black Spots” (Rojeck, 1993), Lennon and Foley introduced the term “Dark Tourism” in a 1996 special issue of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (IJHS), in which they described as “the phenomenon which encompasses the presenta-

tion and consumption by visitors of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (Foley and Lennon 1996a, 1996b). They saw dark tourism destinations as places “that introduce anxiety and doubt about the project of modernity.” (Lennon and Foley, 2000 p. 11) Seaton prefers the term thanatourism, and traces its roots, in the west, at least as far back to Middle Ages pilgrimage (Seaton, 1996) with thanatourism being simply the “travel dimension of thanatopsis,” defined as “travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death” (Seaton, 1996, p. 240). When looked at broadly, visits to sites associated with death appears to be a far more than an obscure niche; Smith suggests that sites or destinations associated with war, for example, probably constitute “the largest single category of tourist attractions in the world” (Smith 1998 p. 205)

Lennon and Foley distinguish between pre-20th century events and the case-studies outlined in their 2000 book on the basis of chronological distance; the key factor being whether events which took place at the sites in question occurred within the memories of those still alive to validate them, and whether they “posit questions or introduce anxiety and doubt about modernity and its consequences”. It is, they write, this particular element of the commodification of anxiety and doubt within interpretations offered and the design of the sites as both products and experiences (including merchandising and revenue generation) that introduces ‘dark tourism’. (Lennon and Foley 2000 p. 12)

While Seaton questions whether the instigation of a questioning of the modern project is a prerequisite for a dark tourism site, there can be little question that this is a characteristic of Hiroshima. One does not have to have

any personal connection with the victims of the A-bomb that was used on Hiroshima to appreciate the possibility of similar fates anywhere with range of an nuclear ICBM.

Later they conjecture on the dilemma that organizations such as national and regional tourism bodies, voluntary groups and commercial businesses face in effecting a chronological distance between the event for which a site may be celebrated once infrastructure has been repaired and investment secured. Although they state that, "Under these circumstance, a former concentration camp, battle site, assassination or killing site or the location of a disaster becomes a tourism resource to be exploited like any other". (Lennon & Foley 2000 pp. 9-10). There is also recognition that for some time after a dark event, it is unseemly to offer any kind of attempt to interpret the events at the site itself. This is true particularly if this interpretation involves any type of what can be construed as 'exploitation'.

Lennon and Foley include Hiroshima (with, among others, concentration camps, First World War and Vietnam War battle sites, Pearl Harbor and Changi Gaol) among a list of examples of horrific events which are well embedded in mass consciousness through popular culture and media, and which now are offered as part of cultural tourism experiences.

Seaton looks more closely at the role of the traveler, that is the consumer of dark tourist sites, and sees dark tourism as a behavioural phenomenon, defined by the tourist's motives as opposed to the particular characteristics of the attraction or destination. He proposes a 'continuum of intensity' dependent on these motives and the extent to which the interest in death is general or person specific. Seaton outlines five categories of death related travel:

- 1 Travel to witness public enactments of death.
- 2 Travel to see sites of individual or mass deaths.
- 3 Travel to memorials or internment sites, including graveyards, cenotaphs crypts and war memorials
- 4 Travel to see evidence or symbolic representations of death at unconnected sites.
- 5 Travel for re-enactments or simulation of death.

(Seaton 2 1996 p. 236 )

It can be said that visits to the sites related to the A-bombing in Hiroshima can come under several of these categories, to which government organizations and, increasingly, businesses cater. Visitor motivations may range from dedicated pilgrimage or an educational option during an otherwise leisure-oriented trip to morbid curiosity or a desire to stand (and perhaps capture photographic evidence of standing) at Ground Zero.

In Stone's "dark tourism spectrum" (Stone 2006) sites *of* death and suffering are darker than those *associated* with death and suffering, concurring with Miles' view that for example Auschwitz-Birkenau is darker than Washington's Holocaust Memorial Museum (Miles 2002). Hiroshima fulfils many of the conditions of a truly dark site, except that is perhaps for the condition of lower tourism infrastructure. Although Hiroshima's tourist sites can in no way be described as "Dark Fun Factories", it points to an element of tension regarding Hiroshima's position.

## 2. Hiroshima as a tourist destination

In his book examining the celebration of the 2600th anniversary of the Japanese Empire in 1940, Ruoff writes that by the 1920s Japan had a national

transportation network that ranked alongside those of other advanced countries and leisure travel came of age in the following two decades. Overseas tourists were welcomed for their hard currency. Domestic tourism, including the wider empire as well as home islands, was promoted by a growing number of local administrations, organizations and travel service centers such as JTB and a proliferation of travel and tourism themed magazines. Even as war on the Asian continent intensified, travel, that might have otherwise been seen as frivolous consumption, was viewed as a patriotic pursuit when it involved visits to national heritage sites and promoted physical well-being. (Ruoff 2010 82-85). One of Hiroshima's first guides to "famous places" dates from as early as 1895 and was published to commemorate victory in the Sino-Japan War. Further guides were published throughout the Meiji and Taisho eras. Many picture postcards showing the sites and scenes of Hiroshima remain from the pre-war era, including those depicting pleasure boats plying the Motoyasu River in front of the Industrial Promotion Hall, the ruin of which would become known as the A-bomb Dome after August 1945.<sup>1)</sup>

In the years after the war, Hiroshima was which was facing severe financial difficulties and the city government took the course of exploiting the symbolic capital that Hiroshima now possessed as a result of the A-bombing for acquiring funds for reconstruction. (Zwigenberg 2014 p. 24) Desires to console and mourn the dead, to appeal for world peace and to boost the devastated economy began to overlap from early on. While the first commemoration of the bombing on August 6, 1946 was a very solemn, religious affair focused on mourning the dead, the following year, a proposal from NHK Hiroshima Central Broadcasting Station, Harushi Ishijima, for a "peace festival" was enthusiastically received by the Chamber of Commerce and the

Hiroshima Tourist Association which, Hiroshima Mayor Hamai wrote, “wanted to inject energy into our moribund retail sector.” (Hamai 2010 pp. 93–95) The delicate task of striking the “proper” tone when connecting commercial activities to the bombing is a theme that runs through Hiroshima’s post-war history and that dated from this first commemoration.

“Some organizations, hoping that a festive atmosphere would help revive the economy, sponsored a costume parade with floats. Some neighborhoods had put up stages for performances of song and dance. This reveling was unbearable to the families of the dead. In this way the Peace Festival had gone wrong. Even the foreign visitors were troubled. One foreign paper reported that the Hiroshima Peace Festival had all the gravitas of a backwoods carnival.”

(Hamai 2010 p. 98)

Despite this failure to strike the appropriate tone, for which the organizing committee apologized after the peace festival, as Zwigenberg writes, by the following year, “the combination of censorship, Japanese and American elites’ shared interests and Hiroshima’s wish to capitalize on its uniqueness to achieve funds made the transformation narrative the mainstay of Hiroshima’s commemoration. The bomb and peace were now connected.” (Zwigenberg 2014 p. 38) The “proper” meaning of the destruction of Hiroshima became that of the city’s rebirth. Concurrently, the horrific deaths of those killed by the blast and the suffering of those continuing to deal with the effects of the bomb, were presented as sacrifices to an age of peace and prosperity.

Even before the first commemoration of the bombing on August 6, 1946 allied reconstruction advisers were calling for Hiroshima to become a sym-

bol of international peace and recommending the construction of a memorial museum and infrastructure to accommodate visitors. (Zwigenberg 2014 p. 25) Zwigenberg quotes one writer from March 1946 who urged city officials to recognize “the connection between peace and tourism, which will hasten the recovery of our city, the capital of the inner sea.” (Zwigenberg 2014 p. 42)

The transformative narrative of “bright peace” was, however, often at odds with the way it appealed to visitors. “Hiroshima’s tourist industry did not frown upon using Hiroshima’s dark appeal and many recognized the A-bomb “ruins of Hiroshima” as “a tourist resource” writes Zwigenberg who compares the dynamic to that of the imperial heritage tourism described by Rouff, with peace replacing nationalism. ‘Atom’ and ‘Atomic’ became a kind of brand with businesses adding it to their names and selling “atomic souvenirs”. Tourist brochures called the city “Atomic Hiroshima” and featured the ruined A-bomb Dome and the mushroom cloud on their covers. Photos from a 1947 Miss Hiroshima contest, organized by the tourist board to help promote a bright image, appeared in the same publications as horrific descriptions accompanied by graphic imagery. (Zwigenberg 2014 p. 43). By 1948, the tourist association had organized a sightseeing bus tour of the “atomic sites in the atom city”, accompanied by attractive guides.

Tourism played an important role in securing funds for the city’s reconstruction. As a result of the destruction and the disbanding of the of the military which had been the main client of its industry, Hiroshima had lost 80% of its tax base and tourism was thought to be a source of revenue from early on. “Hiroshima’s tourist industry did not frown upon using Hiroshima’s dark appeal and many recognized the A-bomb “ruins of Hiroshima” as “a tourist

resource". Many businesses started selling "atomic" souvenirs and putting the word "atomic" before their names and even selling postcards of keloid-scarred backs. A number of tourist brochures called itself "Atom Hiroshima". Commercial drives also led to moves to preserve "atomic sites" so that tourist routes could be established, something that led into increased debate about whether to preserve sites such as the A-bomb Dome reminders of the bombing (and tourism resources) or to erase them to help the city put the bombing behind it and move on. A precursor of today's Peace Memorial Museum, the first exhibition of the A-bomb materials collected by local geologist, Nagaoka Shogo, was arranged with the tourist board as part of a plan to attract domestic tourism to the main city and not just Miyajima and the suburbs." (Zwigenberg 2014 p. 45).

The passing of the 1949 Hiroshima Peace City Memorial Law was essential to the reconstruction of the city, granting it special status and earmarking necessary funds. Neither SCAP nor the Japanese government wanted to be seen to give Hiroshima preferential or special assistance and tourism was listed as one of the five reasons for providing Hiroshima with the funds for reconstruction and reinvention as the Eternal Peace Commemorating City that would benefit the nation as a whole (Zwigenberg 2014 p. 50).

As Zwigenberg states, by end of the 1950s Hiroshima was moving on and the "Peace City" was only one of its identities and has become less and less comfortable with its image as a "dark" travel destination. However, as Lisa Yoneyama writes "That this mecca of peace pilgrimages is simultaneously the site of the world's first atomic destruction has long entrapped city planner in a deep dilemma." (Yoneyama, 1996 p. 46) On the one hand, tourism officials aimed to promote Hiroshima as a destination that offers more

than A-bomb and peace related sites, while, on the other, those who wish to safeguard remembrance and respect for the victims of the A-bombing became less comfortable with its commoditization. This is an unease shown in the debates over the reconstruction of Hiroshima Castle in 1958, preservation of the A-bomb Dome in the 1970s, urban planning in the late 1980s and early 90s commercial development in the vicinity of the Peace Memorial Park.

In her discussion of the plans and promotional campaigns around the 1989 double commemoration of the centennial of the city's incorporation and 400th anniversary of the construction of Hiroshima Castle, Lisa Yoneyama quotes an anonymous city tourism official in an interview concerning the prefectural "Sea and Island Exposition"

"We cannot forever rely on the Atom Bomb Dome or Peace Memorial Park. We are aiming to get rid of the gloominess (*kurasa*)." (Yoneyama 1996 p. 46)

Almost 20 years later, city officials still express (and still, for the most part, off the record) similar sentiments. As Yoneyama goes on to say, there was (and I believe continues to be) no conscious desire to either erase artifacts and monuments of the past nor deny their importance, but suggests that there "is a spacializing strategy whereby visitors might be channeled onto different urban topographies that are defined by dissonant temporalities." (Yoneyama 1996 p. 46)

Yoneyama quotes another tourism official's frustration at reported opposition to a 1989 "Lighten Up Hiroshima" project which illuminated several landmarks, including the A-bomb Dome, as well as streets, parks and shops.

Some *hibakusha* survivors complained was an attempt to trivialize the bombing and “lighten” A-bomb memories”. The same official, when confronted with the suggestion that the city’s tourist administration might be “effacing memories of the atom bomb by uncritically subscribing to consumerism”, answers “Promotion of the tourist industry is itself a very act of pursuing peace. Those who visit Hiroshima to seek an experience of peace can be defined as tourists. It is the same as a pilgrimage to a temple. The town exists at a sacred site, a mecca of peace, is the same as one of those towns that develops from nearby famous temples or shrines, that is, *monzenmachi*” (Yoneyama 1996 p. 52)

Similar questions were once again raised in December 2016. As part of a tourism campaign to commemorate of the 20th anniversary of the designation of the A-bomb Dome, along with nearby Itsukushima on the Island of Miyajima, as a UNESCO world heritage site, the area around the Dome was decorated with 45,000 LED lights and large orizuru paper peace crane ornaments hung from surrounding trees. Head of a local survivor group, Kunihiko Sakuma, expressed concern about the A-bomb Dome being treated as a tourism resource in the same way as Itsukushima Shrine, “The dome was registered to the UNESCO list as a negative legacy, different from ordinary tourism sites.” (Japan Times, 2017). Sakuma went on to say “We want people to visit Hiroshima, see the dome and hear the reality of the atomic bomb victims, as the city hopes… With opinions differing among Hiroshima citizens, it is important to deepen discussions.”

“With opinions differing among Hiroshima citizens” is the key phrase here. Since the rebuilding of the city, which was predicated on the worldwide appeal of Hiroshima as the “City of Peace”, views on the “proper” way to

commemorate its legacy are disparate and varied. For some who see the Peace Memorial Park and its vicinity principally as a massive gravesite, even the lighting in the park after dark is a cause of uneasiness (Yoneyama 1996 p. 52), other welcome those who come visit the Hiroshima to honor the dead and learn about the experience of the A-bombing. Still others, or see the large numbers of visitors as an opportunity to spread the Hiroshima's message of promoting a world free of nuclear weapons. Among those who argue for a "brighter" Hiroshima that welcomes tourists by providing commercial services in the vicinity of the park, some of whom like the tourism officials interviewed by Yoneyama, are *hibaukusha* or descendents of *hibakusha*, see development as something of a restoration of Hiroshima prior to the A-bombing.

### 3. Future directions

In its introduction to Hiroshima in the 1991 edition of its Japan travel guide, Lonely Planet says, "Although it's a busy prosperous, not unattractive industrial city, visitors would have no real reason to leave the shinkansen in Hiroshima... were it not for the that terrible instant on 6 August 1945." (Lonely Planet 1991 p. 518) In 2007, the same publisher included Hiroshima, along with Tokyo and Kyoto, in its guide to "the best cities in the world". It described the city as "so much more than a tasteful reminder of one of the modern world's darkest hours, Hiroshima's cherry blossom-lined streets, local artisans and vivacious entertainment venues embrace a city sparkling with hope and tradition." (Lonely Planet 2007 p. 288)

It appears that the long term project of city officials to "brighten" Hiroshima, at least when it comes to the gaze of the Western visitor, is succeeding. It is surely the case, however, that the prime motivator for

most overseas visitors to Hiroshima is still to visit the site of the world's first nuclear attack. Tourism officials are currently focused on encouraging the vast majority of overseas visitors who visit on day trips to stay overnight and enjoy Hiroshima "beyond the bomb". Hiroshima is so irrevocably associated with the A-bombing in the minds of most overseas visitors, it is this author's belief that attempts to "brighten" the A-bomb sites themselves are, although well-meaning, may be counter-productive, both in terms of spreading messages of peace and maximizing the value of visitors' experience.

Seaton (Seaton 2009 p. 537) calls for more research on the motivations of visitors to dark tourism sites. It is not uncommon for overseas visitors, especially Americans who make up a large proportion of visitors to the city, to experience feeling of trepidation when visiting Hiroshima, unsure of how they might be received. Whatever their motivations may be, for most overseas visitors Hiroshima is a dark attraction. I believe it also worthwhile to investigate how visitor views of Hiroshima differ on arrival and departure. In conclusion, as difficult as it may be to negotiate the varied meanings of Hiroshima among its citizens, by virtue of its "peace mecca" status, Hiroshima also belongs to the world. As Yushi Yutaka writes, as more and more overseas visitors come to Hiroshima, the city is being observed from many different points of view (Yutaka 2009 p. 48). If an encounter with Hiroshima results in a deeper understanding of the events of the bombing and the dangers of nuclear weapons, combined with a sense of hope inspired by the resilience of the rebuilt city, then the darkness itself can perhaps be a source of light.

### Notes

- 1) A selection of documents can be seen at on the Hiroshima Prefectural Archives website [https://www.pref.hiroshima.lg.jp/soshiki\\_file/monjokan/zuroku/h22zuroku-gallery.pdf](https://www.pref.hiroshima.lg.jp/soshiki_file/monjokan/zuroku/h22zuroku-gallery.pdf)

### References

- Malcolm Foley and John Lennon (1996a) "Editorial: Heart of Darkness" *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2(4): 195-197
- Malcolm Foley and John Lennon (1996b) "JFK and a Fascination with Fascination" *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2(4): 210-216
- Shinso Hamai, translated by Elizabeth W. Baldwin (2010): *A-bomb Mayor: Warnings and Hope from Hiroshima*. Publication Committee for the English Version of A-bomb Mayor
- William Miles (2002) "Auschwitz: Museum interpretation and darker tourism." *Annals of Tourism Research* 29(4): 1175-1178
- John Lennon and Malcolm Foley (2000) *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*. Cassell
- Chris Rojek (1993) *Ways of Seeing: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* Macmillan
- Kenneth J. Ruoff (2010): *Imperial Japan At its Zenith: The Wartime Celebration of the Empire's 2,600th Anniversary*. Cornell University Press
- Tony Seaton (1996): "Guided by the Dark; From Thanatosis to Thanatourism" *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2(4): 234-244
- Tony Seaton (2009): "Thanatourism and its Discontents: An Appraisal of a Decade's Work with Some Future Issues and Directions" *The SAGE Handbook of Tourism Studies* pp. 521-542
- Valene Smith (1998): "War and Tourism: An American Ethnography" *Annals of Tourism Research* 25(1): 202-207
- Philip Stone (1996) "A dark tourism spectrum: Towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions." *Tourism: An interdisciplinary International Journal* 54(2): 145-160
- Robert Strauss, Chris Taylor and Tony Wheeler (1991): *Japan - a travel survival kit*. Lonely Planet Publications
- Lisa Yoneyama (1999): *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* Berkley: University of California Press.

Yushi Yutaka (2009): "The Hiroshima 'Peace Memorial': Transforming legacy, memories and landscapes." *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'* pp. 34-49. Routledge.

Ran Zwigenberg (2014): *Hiroshima: The Origins of Global Memory Culture*. Cambridge University Press

*The Cities Book: A Journey Through the Best Cities in the World* (2006) Lonely Planet Publications

*Hiroshima A-Bomb Dome lighting event stirs controversy* (2/2/2017) The Japan Times  
<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/02/02/national/hiroshima-bomb-dome-lighting-event-stirs-controversy/> (last accessed 5/6/2017)